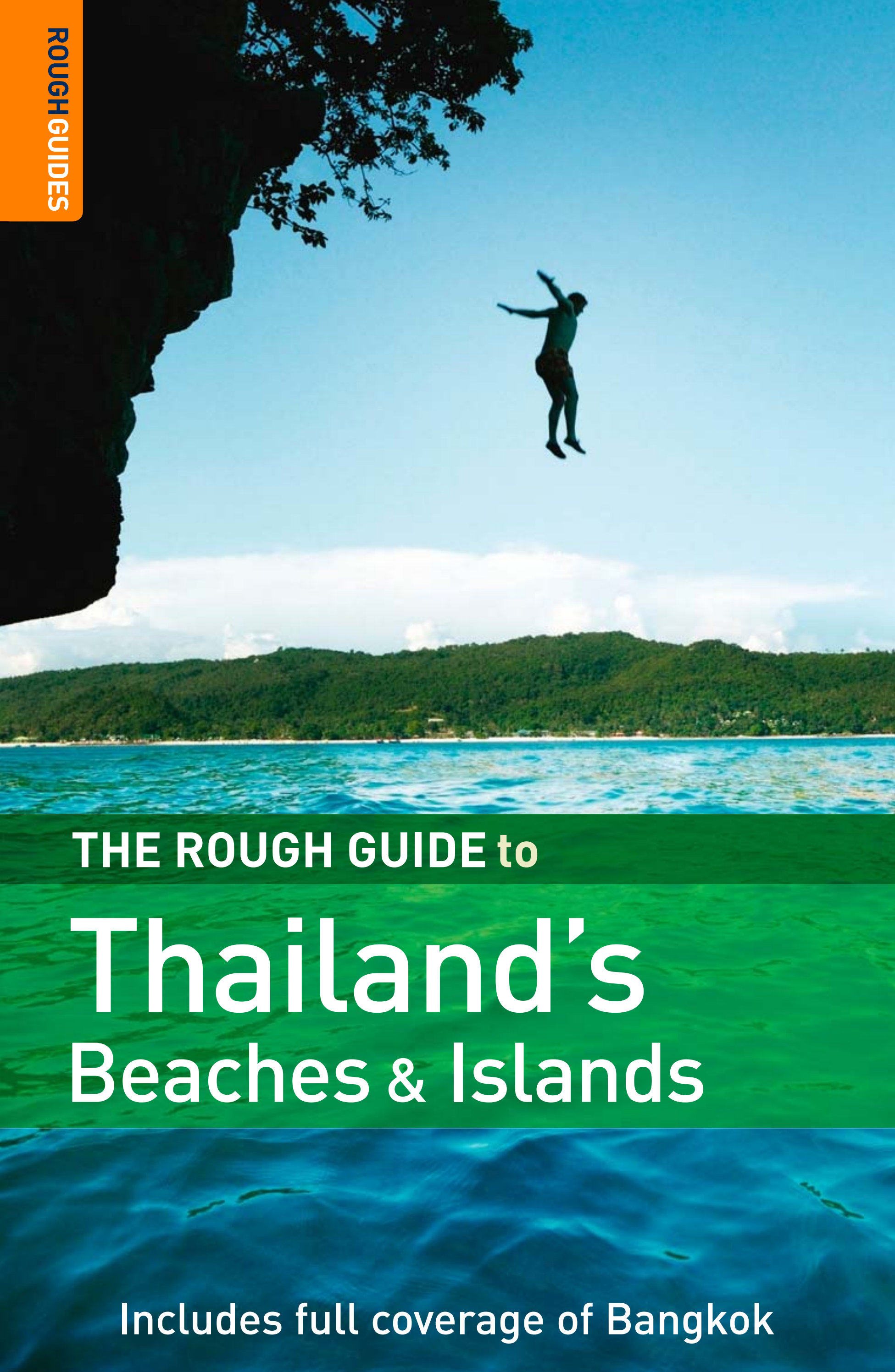
ROUGH GUIDES



THE ROUGH GUIDE to Thailand's Beaches & Islands

Includes full coverage of Bangkok

VISIT…

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About the authors

Paul Gray has been a regular visitor to Thailand since working as an English teacher at the British Council in Chiang Mai in the late 1980s. He is co-author of the *Rough Guide to Thailand* and the *Rough Guide to Bangkok*, as well as the *Rough Guide to Ireland* and *Dublin Directions*, and has edited and contributed to many other guidebooks, including updating his native Northeast for the *Rough Guide to England*.

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Author Picks

Although we try not to waste pages on places we don't like, anything marked with this icon merits a special recommendation, whether it's an atmospheric café, a perfectly sited hotel or a favourite novel. Stickers have been sent out to all of the relevant establishments, but to make sure the place is a genuine recommendation, it's worth checking that it's also listed in the guide.

Accommodation price codes

Throughout this guide, guest houses, hotels and bungalows have been categorized according to the price codes given below. These categories represent the minimum you can expect to pay in the high season (roughly July, Aug and Nov–Feb) for a double room. Full details on p.48.

① Under B200
② B200–350
③ B350–500
④ B500–700
⑤ B700–1000
⑥ B1000–1500
⑦ B1500–2500
⑧ B2500–4000
⑨ Over B4000

Front cover image: Jumping from rock, Ko Phi Phi Ley © Getty
Back cover image: Young Buddhist monks, Hat Noppharat Thara © Alamy
Right: Deckchairs & umbrellas on the beach © Rough Guides

The **Rough Guide** to

Thailand's Beaches & Islands

written and researched by

Paul Gray and Lucy Ridout

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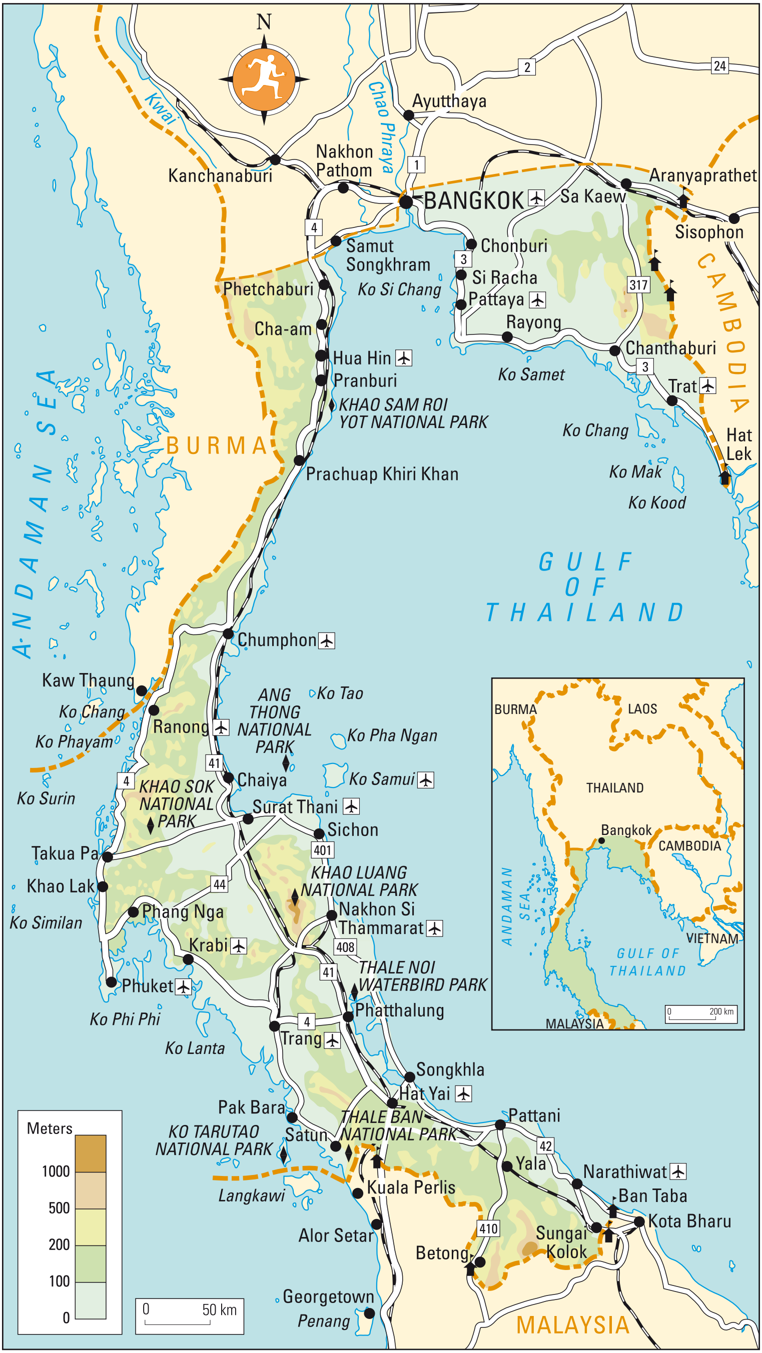
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BANGKOK
Sa Kaew
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4
Samut Songkhram
Chonburi
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Si Racha
Pattaya
Ko Si Chang
Phetchaburi
317
CAMBODIA
Cha-am
Rayong
Chanthaburi
Hua Hin
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3
Pranburi
Trat
KHAO SAM ROI YOT NATIONAL PARK
ANDAMAN SEA
BURMA
Ko Chang
Hat Lek
Prachuap Khiri Khan
Ko Mak
Ko Kood
GULF OF THAILAND
Chumphon
Kaw Thaung
Ko Tao
ANG THONG NATIONAL PARK
Ko Chang
Ranong
Ko Pha Ngan
Ko Phayam
41
4
Chaiya
Ko Samui
KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK
Ko Surin
Surat Thani
Sichon
401
Takua Pa
KHAO LUANG NATIONAL PARK
Khao Lak
44
Nakhon Si Thammarat
Ko Similan
Phang Nga
Krabi
408
41
THALE NOI WATERBIRD PARK
Phuket
Phatthalung
Ko Phi Phi
4
Trang
Ko Lanta
Songkhla
Hat Yai
Pak Bara
Pattani
THALE BAN NATIONAL PARK
KO TARUTAO NATIONAL PARK
Satun
42
Yala
Narathiwat
Langkawi
Kuala Perlis
Ban Taba
Kota Bharu
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Alor Setar
Sungai Kolok
Betong
Georgetown
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Introduction to

Thailand's Beaches & Islands

Despite myriad cultural attractions, sand and sea are what most Thailand holidays are about, and with over three thousand kilometres of tropical coastline there are plenty of stunning white-sand beaches to choose from. In addition, the peculiar shape of the country – which is popularly considered to be reminiscent of an elephant's head, with Bangkok as the eye, the east coast as the chin, and the peninsular Andaman and Gulf coasts forming the trunk – means you can dive, swim and sunbathe all year round, for when the monsoon rains are battering one coast you merely have to cross to the other to escape them.

Geographical differences have given distinctive character to each of the coasts. The **Andaman coast** is the most dramatic, edged by sheer limestone cliffs carved by wind and water into strange silhouettes, and interleaved with thick bands of mangrove forest. The **Gulf coast** begins and ends quietly with relatively flat, featureless stretches to the south of Bangkok and down towards the Malaysian border, but peaks at its midpoint, where the peninsular mountains march into the sea to form the wildly varied landscapes of the Samui archipelago and the Ang Thong National Marine Park. A fair chunk of the **east coast** is dominated by the rigs of offshore oil and gas exploration, but the islands that lie further out have forested spines and gorgeous strands. In short,

Fact file

- Known as Siam until 1939, Thailand lies wholly within the tropics, covering 511,770 square kilometres and divided into 76 provinces or *changwat*. The **population** of 63 million is made up of ethnic Thais (75 percent) and Chinese (14 percent), with the rest mainly immigrants from neighbouring countries and hill-tribespeople; the national language is *phasaa thai*. **Buddhism** is the national religion, practised by some 90 percent of Thais, and Islam the largest minority religion. Average life expectancy is 71 years.
- Since 1932 the country has been a constitutional monarchy; **King Bhumibol**, aka Rama IX (being the ninth ruler of the Chakri dynasty), has been on the throne since 1946. The elected National Assembly (*Rathasapha*) has five hundred MPs in the House of Representatives (*Sapha Phuthaen Ratsadon*), led by a prime minister, and two hundred members of the Senate (*Wuthisapha*).
- Tourism is the country's main **industry**, and its biggest exports are computers and components, vehicles and vehicle parts, textiles and rubber.

△ Monks collecting alms

you'll find great beaches on all three coasts: idyllic confections of clear turquoise waters at invitingly balmy temperatures, sand so soft that it squeaks underfoot, and palm trees laden with coconuts.

The Thai royal family started the craze for seaside holidays by making regular trips to Hua Hin in the early 1900s, and the subsequent construction of the Southern Railway Line soon opened up the region to the rest of the population. Inspired by American GIs who'd discovered Thailand's attractions during their R&R breaks from Vietnam, it wasn't long before foreign holidaymakers followed suit, and these days **tourism** is the main industry in nearly all Thailand's coastal areas. Many of the most beautiful spots have been well and truly discovered, and a number have developed into full-blown high-rise resorts that seem to have more in common with the Costa del Sol than the rest of Southeast Asia. But you need only venture a few kilometres from such anomalies to encounter a more traditional scene of fishing communities, rubber plantations and Buddhist temples. Around fifty percent of

Thais still earn their living from the land or the sea, and over ninety percent of the population are **Theravada Buddhists**, a faith that colours all aspects of daily life – from the tiered temple rooftops that dominate the skyline, to the omnipresent saffron-robed monks and the packed calendar of festivals.

Where to go

Airline schedules decree that many beach holidays begin in **Bangkok**, and despite initial impressions, Thailand's crazy, polluted capital is well worth a couple of days of your time. Within its historic core you'll find the country's most dazzling works of art and architecture, which make a good antidote to the mind-boggling array of traditional markets and contemporary boutiques, hip bars and outstanding restaurants, in the fashionable downtown area.

Within easy striking distance of Bangkok, the east coast resort of **Pattaya** is the country's most popular – and least interesting – destination, a concrete warren of hotels and strip joints that makes its money from package tourists who are unaware of what they're missing. Yet just a few kilometres further east sits the diminutive island of **Ko Samet**, whose superb sands are lined with much more conducive beach bungalows. East again, just inside the Cambodian border, the many and varied beaches fringing large, forested **Ko Chang** offer everything from air-conditioned luxury to travellers' teepees, though for the

▽ Beach vendor, Ko Samet

Traditional massage

Combining elements of yoga and acupressure, **traditional Thai massage** originated as an Ayurvedic therapy in India, and was imported to Thailand – along with Buddhism – by missionary monks around two thousand years ago. As well as stretching muscles and loosening joints, it seeks to stimulate pressure points along the body's energy lines, in order to redress energy imbalances and release blockages, stimulate blood circulation and detoxify organs. Thais will visit a masseur for many conditions, including fevers, headaches, backaches and stomach problems. But even if you're perfectly healthy, you'll enjoy emerging from a massage feeling both relaxed and energized – the effect is similar to that of taking a yoga class without doing any of the hard work. For more on traditional massage, see p.63.

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ALL PRICE FOR 1 HOUR
Thai MASSAGE

ultimate escape you'll need to venture out to one of the smaller islands in the Ko Chang archipelago.

After an interesting inland diversion at the atmospheric, temple-filled town of **Phetchaburi**, the peninsular Gulf coast kicks off with the historic resort of **Hua Hin** – now rather disfigured by excessive hotel development, though still a good place for a seafood dinner and a round of golf. The main draw on this side of the peninsula, though, is the Samui archipelago to the south: **Ko Samui** itself is the most developed of the three main islands here, but has largely kept its good looks and offers an appealing variety of beachside accommodation, restaurants and facilities; **Ko Pha Ngan**, with its small resorts and desolate coves, is still firmly backpacker territory, drawing party people – to **Hat Rin** – and solitude seekers in equal parts; and **Ko Tao** is the remotest outcrop of the three, but has established itself as one of the world's leading centres for scuba-diving courses.

Across on the other side of the peninsula, the Andaman coast boasts even more exhilarating scenery and the finest coral reefs in the country, in particular around the spectacular **Ko Similan** island chain, which ranks as one of the best dive sites in the world. The largest Andaman coast island, **Phuket**, is one of Thailand's top tourist destinations and is graced with a dozen fine beaches, though several of these are marred by expensive high-rises and tacky nightlife. Phuket was one of many places along the Andaman coast to suffer extensive damage in the December 2004 tsunami, but regeneration along the entire coastline has been relatively swift, and few first-time visitors will notice the effects. **Ko Phi Phi** was particularly badly hit, but tourists have returned in droves to rekindle the island's party atmosphere, and to enjoy the coral-rich sea and breathtakingly beautiful limestone cliffs that characterize this part of Thailand – a seascape that's at its most dramatic in the islet-studded bay of **Ao Phang Nga**. Among the countless enticing islands in **Krabi** province, **Ko Lanta** is worth singling out, both for its luxuriously long beaches and for its enduring laid-back vibe, which appeals as much to families as to backpackers. Inland attractions generally pale in comparison to the coastal splendours, but the rainforests of **Khao Sok National Park** are a notable exception.

Further down the Andaman coast, in the provinces of the deep south, the main attractions are teeming sea life and unfrequented sands, whether enjoyed at the national park of **Ko Tarutao**, or in the laid-back bungalow resorts of **Ko Lipe** and the **Trang islands**.

▷ Coastal views, Ko Chang

Rat or raja?

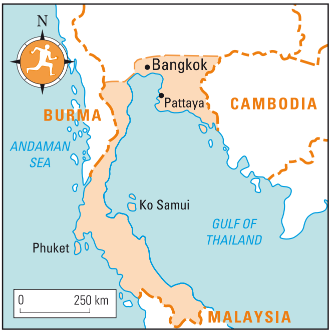
There's no standard system of **transliterating** Thai script into Roman, so you're sure to find that the Thai words in this book don't always match the versions you'll see elsewhere. Maps and street signs are the biggest sources of confusion, so we've generally gone for the transliteration that's most common on the spot. However, sometimes you'll need to do a bit of lateral thinking, bearing in mind that a classic variant for the town of Satun is Satul, while among street names, Thanon Rajavithi could come out as Thanon Ratwithi – and it's not unheard of to find one spelling posted at one end of a road, with another at the opposite end. See p.541 for an introduction to the Thai language.

When to go

The **climate** of most of Thailand is governed by three seasons: rainy (roughly May–Oct), caused by the southwest monsoon dumping moisture gathered from the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand; cool (Nov–Feb); and hot (March–May). The **rainy season** is the least predictable of the three, varying in length and intensity from year to year, but usually it gathers force between June and August, coming to a peak in September and October, when unpaved roads are reduced to mud troughs and whole districts of Bangkok are flooded. The **cool season** is the pleasantest time to visit, although temperatures can still reach a broiling 30°C in the middle of the day. In the **hot season**, when temperatures often rise to 35°C in Bangkok, the best thing to do is to hit the beach.

△ Flower garlands

Within this scheme, slight variations are found from region to region. In southern Thailand, temperatures are more consistent throughout the year, with less variation the closer you get to the equator. The rainy season hits the **Andaman coast** of the southern peninsula harder than anywhere else in the country – heavy rainfall usually starts in May and persists until November. The **Gulf coast** of the southern peninsula lies outside this general pattern – with the sea immediately to the east, this coast and its offshore islands feel the effects of the



northeast monsoon, which brings rain between October and January, especially in November, but suffers less than the Andaman coast from the southwest monsoon.

Overall, the **cool season** is generally the **best time** to come to Thailand: as well as having more manageable temperatures and less rain, it offers waterfalls in full spate and the best of the flowers in bloom. Bear in mind, however, that it's also the busiest season, so forward planning is essential.

Average daily maximum temperatures (°C) and monthly rainfall (mm)

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Bangkok												
°C	26	28	29	30	30	29	29	28	28	28	27	26
mm	11	28	31	72	190	152	158	187	320	231	57	9
Pattaya												
°C	26	28	29	30	30	29	29	28	28	28	27	26
mm	12	23	41	79	165	120	166	166	302	229	66	10
Ko Samui												
°C	26	26	28	29	29	28	28	28	28	27	26	25
mm	38	8	12	63	186	113	143	123	209	260	302	98
Phuket												
°C	27	28	28	29	28	28	28	28	27	27	27	27
mm	35	31	39	163	348	213	263	263	419	305	207	52

19

things not to miss

It's not possible to explore every inch of Thailand's coastline in one trip – and we don't suggest you try. What follows is a selective taste of the highlights: outstanding beaches, spectacular dives, exuberant festivals and unforgettable temples – arranged in five colour-coded categories to help you discover the very best things to see, do and experience. All highlights have a page reference to take you straight into the guide, where you can find out more.

01 **Ko Lanta** Page 465 • There's plenty to do on this large but appealingly low-key island, with its string of long, silken beaches, atmospheric old town and decent reefs within day-tripping distance.

02 **Full moon party at Hat Rin, Ko Pha Ngan** Page 321 • *Apocalypse Now* without the war . . .

04 **Ko Samet** Page 215 • Petite and pretty, Ko Samet is justifiably popular for its gorgeous white-sand beaches and its proximity to Bangkok.

03 **Seafood** Colour insert • Fresh fish, curried with vegetables or steamed whole with ginger and mushrooms, omelettes stuffed with mussels, hot and sour soup with prawns and lemongrass, spicy salads of papaya and crab . . . the only problem is knowing when to stop.

05 **Diving and snorkelling off Ko Similan** Page 385 • The underwater scenery at this remote chain of national park islands is among the finest in the world.

06 **Khao Sok National Park** Page 372 • Mist-clad outcrops, steamy jungle and the vast Cheow Lan lake: Khao Sok is a rewarding place to explore.

07 **Phetchaburi** Page 265 • Many of the temples in this charming, historic town date back 300 years and are still in use today.

08 **Ko Tao** Page 330 • Take a dive course, or just explore this remote island's contours by boat or on foot.

09 **Ko Pha Ngan** Page 317 • The island is dotted with beautiful beaches, so head out to secluded Bottle Beach or Thong Nai Pan, or gear up for the fun at Hat Rin.

10 Vegetarian festival, Phuket Page 395 • During Taoist Lent, fasting Chinese devotees test their spiritual resolve with public acts of gruesome self-mortification.

11 Krung Ching waterfall, Nakhon Si Thammarat Page 346 • On the northern flank of Khao Luang, the south's highest mountain, Krung Ching is southern Thailand's most spectacular drop, reachable only by a nature trail through dense, steamy jungle.

12 Sea-canoeing, Ao Phang Nga Colour insert • Low-impact paddling is the best way to explore the secret island-lagoons and mangrove swamps of this extraordinary bay.

13 **Ko Tarutao National Marine Park** Page 504 • Spectacular and relatively peaceful islands, with a surprising variety of landscapes and fauna, including the shining white crescent of Pattaya Beach on Ko Lipe.

14 **Chatuchak Weekend Market, Bangkok** Page 159 • Thailand's top shopping experience features over 8000 stalls selling everything from fairy lights to cooking pots and hill-tribe jewellery to designer lamps.

15 **Rock-climbing on Laem Phra Nang** Page 440 • Even novice climbers can scale the cliffs here for unbeatable views of the stunning Andaman coastline.

16 **Ko Chang archipelago** Page 235 • Enjoy the fine beaches of Thailand's second-largest island, or escape to a more peaceful corner of the archipelago, such as this one on Ko Mak.

17 **The Grand Palace, Bangkok** Page 125 • No visitor should miss this huge complex, which encompasses the country's holiest and most beautiful temple, Wat Phra Kaeo, and its most important image, the Emerald Buddha.

18 **Night markets** Page 51 • After-dark gatherings of dramatically lit pushcart kitchens, which are usually the best-value and most entertaining places to eat.

19 **Songkhran** Page 79 • Thai New Year is the excuse for a national water fight – don't plan on getting much done if you come in mid-April, just join in the fun.

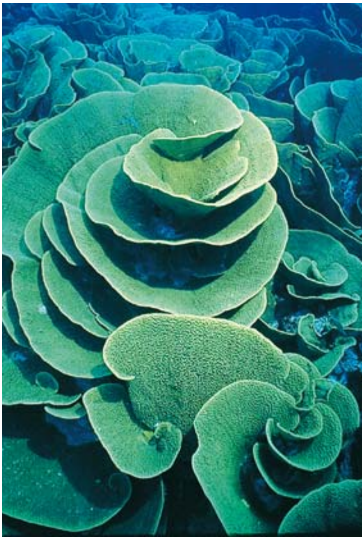
Underwater Thailand

The Indian Ocean (Andaman Sea) and the South China Sea (Gulf of Thailand) together play host to over 850 species of open-water fish, more than 100 species of reef fish and some 270 species of hard coral. On these pages we highlight just a few of the most interesting examples; for information on the best dive sites and bases, see "Outdoor activities" in Basics on p.57.

Coral

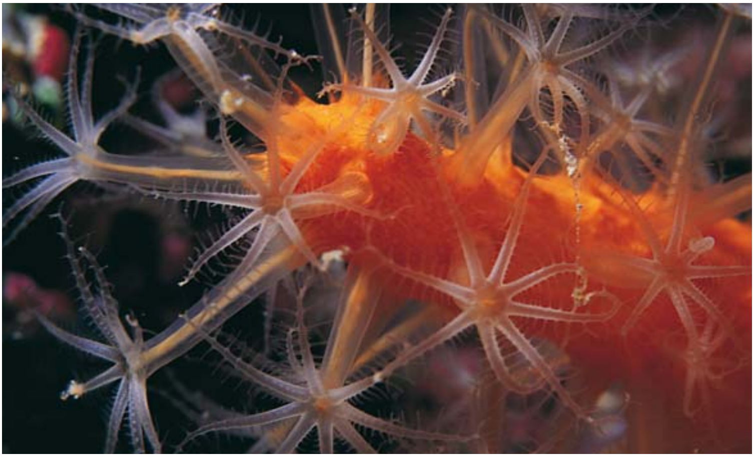
Coral reefs are living organisms composed of a huge variety of marine life forms, but the foundation of every reef is its ostensibly inanimate **stony coral** constructions such as **boulder**, **cabbage patch**, **cave**, **mushroom**, **bushy staghorn** and **brain coral**. Stony coral is composed of colonies of polyps – minuscule invertebrates which feed on plankton, generally depend on algae and direct sunlight for photosynthesis, and extract calcium carbonate (limestone) from sea water in order to reproduce. The polyps use this calcium carbonate to build new skeletons outside their bodies – an asexual reproductive process known as budding – and this is how a reef is formed. It's an extraordinarily slow process, with colony growth averaging between 0.5cm and 2.8cm a year.

Fleshy, plant-like **soft coral**, such as **dead man's fingers** and **elephant's ear**, is also composed of polyps, but is a variety with flaccid internal skeletons built from protein rather than calcium. The lack of an external casing means the polyps' vivid colours are much more visible and, as they do not depend on direct sunlight, they flourish at greater depths, swaying with the currents and using tentacles to trap micro-organisms.



△ Cabbage patch coral

Horny coral, or **gorgonians**, like **sea whips** and **sea fans**, are a cross between stony and soft coral, while **sea anemones** have much the most obvious, and poisonous, tentacles of any member of the coral family, using them to trap fish and other large prey.



▷ Dead man's fingers

Reef fish

The algae and plankton that accumulate around coral colonies attract a catalogue of fish known collectively as **reef fish**. Most are small in stature, with vibrant and exotically patterned skins for camouflage against the coral, and flattened bodies, broad tails and specially adapted fins for easy manoeuvring around the tiniest of reef crannies.

△ Emperor angelfish

Butterfly fish are typically well designed: named for the butterfly-like movements of their thin, flat, yellow-white-and-black bodies, they can swim backwards, and some also have elongated snouts for nosing into crevices; a number even sport eye-like blotches near the tail to confuse predators. Members of the similarly well-fashioned **angelfish** family include the luscious tangerine-and-blue-striped **emperor angelfish**, which makes an audible clicking sound when disturbed and can grow to 30cm in length. The **moorish idol** is easily recognized by the long pennant fin trailing from its dorsal fin, the pronounced snout and dramatic bands of colour.

▷ Surgeon fish

There are around one hundred different species of **surgeonfish**, each with its

▷ Moray eel

own distinctive markings, but they all share the feature that gives them their name – a sharp blade on either side of the tail-base that becomes erect when antagonized and can inflict serious damage.

▷ Anemonefish

Among the most impressive reef fish that school are the huge shoals of silvery **fusilierfish** (see picture, p.18), which move as one, changing direction in an eyecatching flash of rippling silver.

▷ Barracuda

Some reef fish, among them the ubiquitous **parrot fish**, eat coral. With the help of a bird-like beak, which is in fact several teeth fused together, the parrot fish scrapes away at the coral, leaving characteristic white scars, and then grinds the fragments down with another set of back teeth – a practice reputedly responsible for the erosion of a great deal of Thailand's reef.

Anemonefish are so called because, having covered themselves in the sea anemone's mucus, they are able to move amongst and gain protection from the anemone's venomous tentacles, which would paralyse other fish on contact.

Equally predictable is the presence of cleaner fish, or **cleaner wrasse**, on the edges of every shoal of reef fish. Streamlined, with a long snout and jaws that act like tweezers, a cleaner fish spends its days picking parasites off the skins of other fish, such as the normally voracious **grouper fish** – a symbiotic relationship essential to both parties. The commonly sighted **coral hind** is a close but more colourful relative of the grouper and is often found among bushy staghorn coral.

Larger, less frequent visitors to Thailand's offshore reefs include the **moray eel**, whose elongated jaws of viciously pointed teeth make it a deadly predator; it hunts mainly at night and often holes up in coral caves during the day. The similarly be-fanged **barracuda** can grow to 2m and is the world's fastest-swimming fish.

△ Whale shark

Sharks and rays

Passive **leopard sharks** and the more excitable **white-tip reef sharks** are quite common off the Andaman coast reefs, but you'd be lucky indeed to encounter a **whale shark**, which, at up to 18m long, is the largest fish in the world.

It is sometimes possible to swim with a **manta ray**, whose extraordinary flatness, strange wing-like fins, and massive size – up to 6m across and weighing some 1600kg – make it an astonishing presence.

△ Manta ray

Turtles

Turtles sometimes paddle around reef waters, too, but all four local species – **leatherback**, **Olive Ridley**, **green** and **hawksbill** – are fast becoming endangered in Thailand, so much so that several of their egg-laying beaches have been placed under national park protection, including those on Ko Surin Tai, Ko Tarutao and Hat Mai Khao on Phuket; see p.505 for more about Thailand's turtles.

▷ Green turtle

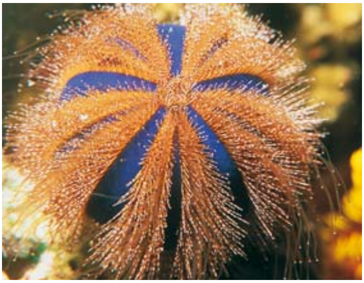
Invertebrates

Thailand's reefs support countless species of **invertebrates**, including spiral-feathered **Christmas-tree worms**, also sometimes evocatively known as bottle-brush worms, which embed their lower bodies in coral heads; all sorts of multi-celled, multi-hued **sponges**, both encrusting and free-standing; and a thousand-plus species of hermaphroditic, shell-less mollusc known as **nudibranchs** or sea slugs, which come in an arresting array of patterns and shapes and live in shallow waters.

Of the reef's numerous spiny echinoderms, the commonest **sea urchins**, which also tend to live in shallow areas near shore, are those with evil-looking black spines up to 35cm in length, though some varieties are covered in short, blunt spines or even excruciatingly painful flower-like pincers.

The magnificent **crown-of-thorns starfish** is also protected by highly venomous spines, which sheath the twenty or so "arms" that extend from a body that can measure up to 50cm in diameter. Disastrously for many reefs, the crown-of-thorns starfish feeds on coral, laying waste to as much as fifty square centimetres of stony coral in a 24-hour period. The much more benign **feather stars** also have multiple feather-like arms arranged in star formations and come in many versions; they feed at night, crawling along reef surfaces with the help of tiny jointed limbs, or cirri, to sway in the current.

Though hideous, the **sea cucumber**, which looks like a large slug



◁ Sea urchin

and lies half-buried on the sea bed, is quite harmless. Deceptively slothful in appearance, sea cucumbers are constantly ingesting and excreting so much sand and mud that the combined force of those in a three-square-kilometre area can together redistribute one million kilogrammes of sea-bed material a year.

Hazardous marine life

Thailand is also home to 25 species of **sea snake**, whose tails are flattened to act as an efficient paddle in water. Most sea snakes are venomous, though not aggressive. Of the poisonous ones, the commonest and most easily recognized is the banded sea snake, which is silvery grey with thirty to fifty black bands and a slightly yellow underside at its front end. It grows to 1.5m and inhabits shallow coastal waters, coming onto land to lay its eggs.

▷ Lionfish

Other harmful creatures to be avoided include the highly camouflaged seabed-dwelling **stonefish** and **scorpionfish**, both of whom can be very hard to spot but have extremely poisonous spines which are dangerous when trodden on.

The magnificent **lionfish** should also be admired from afar as its impressive plumes are poisonous if brushed against, as are the tentacles of the **jellyfish**.

The **blue-spotted ray** or **stingray** has two venomous spines on its long tail with which it lashes out when threatened; as it tends to bury itself with almost complete disguise in the mud or sand near reefs, it can be a particular hazard to unwary divers. Another thing to be wary of is so-called **fire coral** (not actually a true coral but a coral-like brownish encrustation), which is found in shallow waters on the edge of the reef and is covered in a mass of tiny, fuzz-like tentacles that can inflict a painful burn. For advice on how to treat injuries inflicted by these underwater hazards, see Basics p.37.

◁ Blue-spotted ray

Basics

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Getting there

Thailand currently has international airports in Bangkok, Hat Yai, Krabi, Phuket and Ko Samui. The vast majority of travellers fly into Bangkok. At the time of writing, the brand-new Suvarnabhumi Airport had just opened and all scheduled international flights into Bangkok now land there. Some charters may continue to use Don Muang however. See p.91 for more information about both airports.

Air fares to Thailand always depend on the **season**, with the highest being around mid-November to mid-February, when the weather is best (with premium rates charged for flights between mid-Dec and New Year), and in July and August to coincide with school holidays. You will need to book several months in advance to get reasonably priced tickets during these peak periods.

The cheapest way of getting straight to most **regional Thai airports** is usually to buy a flight to Bangkok and then a domestic add-on; see p.42 for details of domestic airlines. An alternative option for **Phuket** would be to fly there with Malaysia Airlines via Kuala Lumpur, or Singapore Airlines via Singapore, avoiding Bangkok altogether. You can also go via Singapore for direct connections to **Ko Samui** (Bangkok Airways) and **Krabi** (Tiger Airways). Berjaya Airlines' KL–Samui flights and Bangkok Airways' Hong Kong–Samui route might also be useful options if you want to miss out Bangkok.

Flights from the UK and Ireland

The fastest and most comfortable way of reaching Thailand **from the UK** is to fly nonstop from London to Bangkok with Qantas/British Airways, Thai Airways or Eva Airways – a journey time of about eleven and a half hours. These airlines usually keep their prices competitive, at around £510/730 plus tax in low season/high season. Fares on indirect scheduled flights to Bangkok – with a change of plane en route – are always cheaper than nonstop flights and start at £330/590, though these journeys can take anything from two to twelve hours longer.

There are no nonstop flights from any regional airports in Britain or from any **Irish airports**, and rather than routing via London, you may find it convenient to fly to another hub such as Amsterdam (with KLM), Frankfurt (with Lufthansa), Paris (with Air France), Zurich (with Swiss) or even Dubai (with Emirates), and take a connecting flight from there. Note, however, that changing planes at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris is a perennial nightmare, partly due to the huge queues at security checks in the transit area, and that KLM can be less than reliable. Flights from Glasgow via Dubai with Emirates, for example, start at around £490, from Dublin via Zurich with Swiss, at around €690.

Flights from the US and Canada

Thai Airways operate **nonstop flights** to Bangkok from New York (4 weekly; around US$1100/1250 low season/high season) and Los Angeles (4–6 weekly; US$1150/1350). Otherwise, plenty of airlines run daily flights to Bangkok from major East and West Coast cities with only **one stop** en route; it's generally easier to find a reasonable fare on flights via Asia than via Europe, even if you're departing from the East Coast. From New York expect to pay around US$1100/1250 in low season/high season, from LA US$825/950.

Air Canada has the most convenient service to Bangkok from the largest number of Canadian cities; from Vancouver, expect to pay around C$1400/1600 in low season/high season; from Toronto, C$1600/1850. Cheaper rates are often available if you're prepared to make two or three stops and take more time.

Fly less – stay longer! Travel and climate change

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Rough Guides regard travel, overall, as a global benefit, and feel strongly that the advantages to developing economies are important, as is the opportunity of greater contact and awareness among peoples. But we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming, and that means giving thought to how often we fly, and what we can do to redress the harm that our trips create.

Flying and climate change

Pretty much every form of motorized travel generates CO_2 (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release a selection of greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. Two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity over a whole year.

Fuel-cell and other less harmful types of plane may emerge eventually. But until then, there are really just two options for concerned travellers: to reduce the amount we travel by air (take fewer trips – stay for longer!), and to make the trips we do take "climate neutral" via a carbon offset scheme.

Carbon offset schemes

Offset schemes run by climatecare.org, carbonneutral.com and others allow you to make up for some or all of the greenhouse gases that you are responsible for releasing. To do this, they provide "carbon calculators" for working out the global-warming contribution of a specific flight (or even your entire existence), and then let you contribute an appropriate amount of money to fund offsetting measures. These include rainforest and other indigenous reforestation, and initiatives to reduce future energy demand – often run in conjunction with sustainable development schemes.

Rough Guides, together with Lonely Planet and other concerned partners in the travel industry, are supporting a carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Please take the time to view our website and see how you can help to make your trip climate neutral.

Ⓦ **www.roughguides.com/climatechange**

Although layover times can vary, the actual **flying time** is approximately 17 hours from either New York or LA. From Canada, you can expect to spend something like 16 hours in the air flying from Vancouver (via Tokyo) or at least twenty hours from Montréal (via Europe).

Flights from Australia and New Zealand

There's no shortage of **scheduled flights** to Bangkok **from Australia**, with direct services from major cities operated by Thai Airways, Qantas/British Airways and Emirates (around nine hours from Sydney and Perth), and plenty of indirect flights via Asian hubs, which take at least eleven and a half hours. There's often not much difference between the fares on nonstop and indirect flights, with fares starting from around A$800/1200 (excluding taxes) in low/high season from Sydney and most major eastern Australian cities; special promotions are quite common, however, so you could be looking at low-season flights for as little as A$730. Fares from Perth and Darwin are up to A$100/200 cheaper.

From **New Zealand**, Thai Airways runs nonstop twelve-hour flights between Auckland and Bangkok, charging from NZ$1250/1700 (excluding taxes) in low/high season. BA/Qantas and Emirates flights from Auckland make brief stops in Sydney, adding at least a couple of hours to the trip, and other major Asian airlines offer indirect flights via their hubs (from 17 hours): fares for indirect flights also start at about NZ$1250/1700. From Christchurch and Wellington you'll pay NZ$150–300 more than from Auckland.

Flights from South Africa

There are no nonstop flights **from South Africa** to Thailand, but Singapore Airlines can get you from Johannesburg to Bangkok, via a brief stop in Singapore, in 14 hours. From Cape Town it's a minimum of 18 hours, going via Kuala Lumpur. Other airlines, including South African Airways, make a stop either in the Middle East or in Hong Kong or Southeast Asia. Fares start at about R10,000/7600 for high/low season, including taxes.

Online booking

ⓦ **www.expedia.co.uk** (in UK), ⓦ **www.expedia.com** (in US), ⓦ **www.expedia.ca** (in Canada)
ⓦ **www.lastminute.com** (in UK)
ⓦ **www.opodo.co.uk** (in UK)
ⓦ **www.orbitz.com** (in US)
ⓦ **www.travelocity.co.uk** (in UK), ⓦ **www.travelocity.com** (in US), ⓦ **www.travelocity.ca** (in Canada), ⓦ **www.zuji.com.au** (in Australia), ⓦ **www.zuji.co.nz** (in New Zealand)

Airlines

Air France US ⓣ1-800/237-2747, Canada ⓣ1-800/667-2747, UK ⓣ0870/142-4343, Australia ⓣ1300/390-190, ⓦwww.airfrance.com.
Air New Zealand US ⓣ1-800/262-1234, Canada ⓣ1-800/663-5494, UK ⓣ0800/028-4149, Republic of Ireland ⓣ1800/551-447, New Zealand ⓣ0800/737 000, ⓦwww.airnewzealand.com.
Bangkok Airways ⓦwww.bangkokair.com.
British Airways US and Canada ⓣ1-800/AIRWAYS, UK ⓣ0870/850 9850, Republic of Ireland ⓣ1890/626 747, Australia ⓣ1300/767 177, New Zealand ⓣ09/966 9777, ⓦwww.ba.com.
Cathay Pacific US ⓣ1-800/233-2742, UK ⓣ020/8834 8888, Australia ⓣ13 1747, New Zealand ⓣ09/379 0861; ⓦwww.cathaypacific.com.
China Airlines US ⓣ917/368-2003, UK ⓣ020/7436 9001, Australia ⓣ02/9232 3336, New Zealand ⓣ09/308 3364, ⓦwww.china-airlines.com.
Delta US and Canada ⓣ1-800/221-1212, ⓦwww.delta.com.
Emirates US ⓣ1-800/777-3999, UK ⓣ0870/243 2222, Australia ⓣ02/9290 9700, New Zealand ⓣ09/968 2200, South Africa ⓣ0861-364728, ⓦwww.emirates.com.
Etihad Airways Canada ⓣ905 858 8998, UK ⓣ020/8735 6700, South Africa ⓣ0861-ETIHAD, ⓦwww.etihadairways.com.
EVA Air US and Canada ⓣ1-800/695-1188, UK ⓣ020/7380 8300, Australia ⓣ02/8338 0419, New Zealand ⓣ09/358 8300, ⓦwww.evaair.com.
Finnair US ⓣ1-800/950-5000, UK ⓣ0870/241 4411, Republic of Ireland ⓣ01/844 6565, Australia ⓣ02/9244 2299, ⓦwww.finnair.com.
Garuda Indonesia US ⓣ212/279-0756, UK ⓣ020/7467 8600, Australia ⓣ1300/365 330 or 02/9334 9944, New Zealand ⓣ09/366 1862, ⓦwww.garuda-indonesia.com.
KLM US ⓣ1-800/225-2525. UK ⓣ0870/507 4074, Australia ⓣ1300 303 747, New Zealand ⓣ09/309 1782; ⓦwww.klm.com.
Korean Air US and Canada ⓣ1-800/438-5000, UK ⓣ0800/0656-2001, Republic of Ireland ⓣ01/799 7990, Australia ⓣ02/9262 6000, New Zealand ⓣ09/914 2000, ⓦwww.koreanair.com.
Lufthansa US ⓣ1-800/645-3880, Canada ⓣ1-800/563-5954, UK ⓣ0870/837 7747, Republic of Ireland ⓣ01/844 5544, Australia ⓣ1300 655 727, New Zealand ⓣ09/303 1529, ⓦwww.lufthansa.com.
Malaysia Airlines US ⓣ1-800/552-9264, UK ⓣ0870/607 9090, Republic of Ireland ⓣ01/676 2131, Australia ⓣ293/13 26 27, New Zealand ⓣ0800/777 747, South Africa ⓣ011/880-9614 ⓦwww.malaysia-airlines.com.
Northwest/KLM US ⓣ1-800/225-2525, ⓦwww.nwa.com.
Qantas Airways US and Canada ⓣ1-800/227-4500, UK ⓣ0845/774 7767, Republic of Ireland ⓣ01/407 3278, Australia ⓣ13 13 13, New Zealand ⓣ0800/808 767 or 09/357 8900, ⓦwww.qantas.com.
Qatar Airways US ⓣ1-877/777-2827, Canada ⓣ1-888/366-5666, UK ⓣ020/7896 3636, ⓦwww.qatarairways.com.
Royal Brunei UK ⓣ020/7584 6660, Australia ⓣ1300-721271, New Zealand ⓣ09/977 2209, ⓦwww.bruneiair.com.
Royal Jordanian US ⓣ1-800/223-0470, Canada ⓣ1-800/363-0711 or 514/288-1647, UK ⓣ020/7878 6300, Australia ⓣ02/9244 2701, New Zealand ⓣ03/365 3910, ⓦwww.rj.com.
Silk Air ⓦwww.silkair.com.
Singapore Airlines US ⓣ1-800/742-3333, Canada ⓣ1-800/663-3046, UK ⓣ0844/800-2380, Republic of Ireland ⓣ01/671 0722, Australia ⓣ13 1011, New Zealand ⓣ0800/808-909, South Africa ⓣ021/674-0601, ⓦwww.singaporeair.com.

South African Airways US and Canada ⓣ1-800/722-9675, UK ⓣ0870/747 1111, Australia ⓣ1800/221 699, New Zealand ⓣ09/977 2237, South Africa ⓣ011/978-1111, ⓦwww.flysaa.com.

Swiss US and Canada ⓣ1-877/359-7947, UK ⓣ0845/601 0956, Republic of Ireland ⓣ1890/200 515, Australia ⓣ1300 724 666, New Zealand ⓣ09/977 2238, South Africa ⓣ0860 040506, ⓦwww.swiss.com.

Thai Airways US ⓣ212/949-8424, Canada ⓣ416/971-5181, UK ⓣ0870/606 0911, Australia ⓣ1300 651 960, New Zealand ⓣ09/377 3886, ⓦwww.thaiair.com.

Tiger Airways ⓦwww.tigerairways.com.

Turkish Airlines ⓣ1-800/874-8875, UK ⓣ020/7766 9300, Australia ⓣ02/9299 8400, ⓦwww.thy.com.

Travel agents and tour operators worldwide

Adventure Center US ⓣ1-800/228-8747 or 510/654-1879, ⓦwww.adventurecenter.com. "Soft adventure" specialist agent, offering dozens of packages to Thailand with well-regarded tour operators from all over the world.

Asian Pacific Adventures US ⓣ1-800/825-1680 or 818/881 2745, ⓦwww.asianpacificadventures.com. Individualized, small-group tours and tailor-mades, including activities such as canoeing, cruises and Thai cooking.

Asian Trails Thailand ⓣ02 626 2000, ⓦwww.asiantrails.net. Well-regarded company that does self-drive tours, cycling and motorcycling adventures, homestay programmes, river- and sea cruises, plus more typical package tours.

Bike and Travel Thailand ⓣ02 990 0274, ⓦwww.cyclingthailand.com. Organizes joint and private cycling holidays across Thailand. Mountain bikes and support vehicle provided.

Creative Events Asia Thailand ⓦwww.creativeeventsasia.com. Wedding specialists for everything from paperwork to the ceremony and guest accommodation.

Crooked Trails US ⓣ206/372-4405, ⓦwww.crookedtrails.com. Not-for-profit community-based tourism organization offering homestays along the Andaman coast, usually featuring volunteer work as well as cultural tours.

ebookers UK ⓣ0800/082 3000, ⓦwww.ebookers.com, Republic of Ireland ⓣ01/488-3507 ⓦwww.ebookers.ie. Low fares on an extensive selection of scheduled flights and package deals.

Educational Travel Center US ⓣ1-800/747-5551 or 608/256-5551, ⓦwww.edtrav.com. Low-cost fares, student/youth discount offers, car rental and tours.

ETC (Educational Travel Centre) Thailand ⓣ02 224 0043, ⓦwww.etc.co.th. Tour operator whose highlights include overnight rice barge cruises from Bangkok, and Khao Sok safaris.

Flight Centre US ⓣ1-866 967 5351, Canada ⓣ1-877 967 5302, UK ⓣ0870/499 0040, Australia ⓣ13 31 33, New Zealand ⓣ0800/243 544, South Africa ⓣ0860 400 727, ⓦwww.flightcentre.com. Guarantee to offer the lowest air fares; also sell a wide range of package holidays and adventure tours.

Gecko Travel UK ⓣ023/9225 8859, Thailand ⓣ081 885 9490, ⓦwww.geckotravel.com. Southeast Asia specialist operating small-group adventure holidays with off-the-beaten-track itineraries, as well as motorbike tours, family-oriented tours and shorter trips out of Bangkok.

gohop Republic of Ireland ⓣ01/241 2389, ⓦwww.gohop.ie. Irish-owned agent, offering flights, packages, hotels and car rental.

Intrepid Travel US ⓣ1-866/847 8192, Canada ⓣ1-866/732 5885, UK and Ireland ⓣ0800/917 6456, Australia ⓣ1300/360 887 New Zealand ⓣ0800/174 043, ⓦwww.intrepidtravel.com. Well regarded small-group adventure tour operator that uses local transport and travellers'-style accommodation.

Journeys International US ⓣ1-800/255-8735 or 734/665-4407, ⓦwww.journeys-intl.com. Long-standing, award-winning operator focusing on eco-tourism and small-group or customized trips.

Lost Horizons Thailand ⓣ081 910 4525, ⓦlosthorizonsasia.com. Eco-minded activity packages, including yoga holidays and turtle-conservation projects, plus cycling, kayaking, trekking etc. Destinations include Khao Sok and southern beaches.

Nature Trails Thailand ⓣ02 735 0644, ⓦwww.naturetrailsthailand.com. Specialist bird-watching tours in Thailand's national parks.

North South Travel UK ⓣ01245/608 291, ⓦwww.northsouthtravel.co.uk. Competitive travel agency, offering discounted fares worldwide. Profits are used to support projects in the developing world, especially the promotion of sustainable tourism.

Open World Thailand ⓣ02 974 3866, ⓦwww.openworldthailand.com. Award-winning operator offering a diverse programme of trips, notably bird-watching expeditions, cultural tours and Buddhism and meditation trips.

Origin Asia Thailand ⓣ02 259 4896, ⓦwww.alex-kerr.com. Cultural programmes that teach and explain living Thai arts such as dance, music, martial arts, textiles, flower offerings and cooking. Courses last from one day to a week and are held in Bangkok.

Real Traveller Canada ⓣ1-888/800-4100,

ⓦ www.realtraveller.com. Vancouver-based agent for a multitude of adventure companies all over the world, specializing in small-group and customized trips.

Responsible Ecological Social Tours (REST) Thailand ⓦ www.rest.or.th. Long-running promoter of community-based tourism that operates homestay programmes in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Ko Yao Noi.

Spice Roads Thailand ⓣ 02 712 5305, ⓦ www.spiceroads.com. Escorted bike tours to south Thailand. Tailor-made itineraries also available.

STA Travel US ⓣ 1-800/781-4040, Canada ⓣ 1-888/427-5639, UK ⓣ 0870/1630-026, Australia ⓣ 1300/733 035, New Zealand ⓣ 0508/782 872, South Africa ⓣ 0861 781 781, ⓦ www.statravel.com. Worldwide specialists in independent travel; also student IDs, travel insurance, car rental, rail passes, and more. Good discounts for students and under-26s.

Telltale Travel UK ⓣ 0800/011 2571, ⓦ wwww.telltaletravel.co.uk. Tailor-made tours that aim to offer as authentic an experience as possible, with accommodation mainly in homestays (many of them quite upmarket) in Bangkok and around the country.

Thompsons Tours South Africa ⓣ 011/770-7700, ⓦ www.thompsons.co.za. Flights and package holidays.

Trailfinders UK ⓣ 0845/058 5858, Republic of Ireland ⓣ 01/677 7888, Australia ⓣ 1300/780 212, ⓦ www.trailfinders.com. One of the best-informed and most efficient agents for independent travellers.

Travel Cuts US ⓣ 1-800/592-CUTS, Canada ⓣ 1-866/246-9762, ⓦ www.travelcuts.com. Popular, long-established specialists in budget travel, including student and youth discount offers.

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USIT Republic of Ireland ⓣ 01/602 1904, Northern Ireland ⓣ 028/9032 7111, with branches in Athlone, Belfast, Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Waterford, ⓦ www.usit.ie. Ireland's main outlet for discounted, youth and student fares.

Travel via neighbouring countries

Sharing land borders with Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia, Thailand works well as part of many overland itineraries, both across Asia and between Europe and Australia. In addition, Bangkok is one of the major regional flight hubs for Southeast Asia.

The main restrictions on overland routes in and out of Thailand are determined by **visas**, and by where the permitted land crossings lie. At any of the land borders described below, most passport holders should be able to get an on-the-spot thirty-day entry stamp into Thailand, which can be extended for ten days at Thai provincial immigration offices for a swingeing B1900. It's easy enough, however, to hop across one of the land borders and return on the same day with another, free thirty-day stamp, or you might want to apply for a sixty-day tourist visa instead, obtainable in advance from Thai embassies.

Full details of **visa requirements** are given on p.33.

You may need to buy visas for your next port of call when in Thailand; details of visa requirements for travel to Thailand's immediate neighbours are outlined below, but these can change so it's worth checking in advance before you travel. All **Asian embassies** are located in Bangkok: see p.189 for contact details. Many Khao San tour agents offer to get your visa for you, but beware, as some are reportedly **faking the stamps**, which could get you in pretty serious trouble, so it's safer to go to the embassy yourself.

The right paperwork is also crucial if you're planning to **drive your own car or motorbike** into Thailand. For advice on this, consult the Golden Triangle Rider website (Ⓦwww.gt-rider.com/crossingborders.html), which has up-to-date, first-hand accounts of border crossings with a vehicle between many Southeast Asian countries, with lots of detail on Thailand.

Burma

At the time of writing, there is no overland access from **Burma** into Thailand and access in the opposite direction is restricted: Western tourists are only allowed to make limited-distance day-trips into Burma at a few points, including Kaw Thaung (Victoria Point) near Ranong (see p.358). Tourists who intend to enter Burma by air can buy four-week tourist visas at the Burmese embassy in Bangkok (see p.189) for about B800; apply to the embassy and you may be able to collect the same day, or definitely the following day.

Cambodia

At the time of writing, six overland crossings on the **Thai-Cambodia border** are open to non-Thais, but check with the Cambodian Embassy in Bangkok as well as with other travellers first, as regulations are changeable. See Ⓦwww.talesofasia.com/cambodia-overland.htm for travellers' up-to-the-minute accounts of all the border crossings.

Most travellers use either the crossing at Poipet, which has transport connections to Sisophon, Siem Reap and Phnom Penh and lies just across the border from the Thai town of Aranyaprathet (see p.229), with its transport to Chanthaburi and Bangkok; or they follow the route from Sihanoukville in Cambodia via Koh Kong and Hat Lek to Trat (see p.232), which is near Ko Chang on Thailand's east coast. The Trat route is the fastest option if you're travelling nonstop from Bangkok to Cambodia.

The crossings in northeast Thailand include the Chong Chom–O'Smach border pass, near Kap Choeng in Thailand's Surin province, and the Sa Ngam–Choam border in Si Saket province – from both these borders there's transport to Anlong Veng and Siem Reap. There are also two crossings in Chanthaburi province (see p.229), with transport to and from Pailin in Cambodia.

Visas for Cambodia are issued to travellers on arrival at Phnom Penh and Siem Reap airports, and at the Aranyaprathet–Poipet, Hat Lek–Koh Kong, Chong Chom–O'Smach and Ban Pakkard–Phsa Prom (Chanthaburi) land borders; you need US$20 and two photos for this. You may also want to bring a (real or self-made) International Quarantine Booklet showing dates of your vaccinations, as border guards at overland crossings have been known to (illegally) charge foreigners without vaccination cards a US$5 penalty fee. If you do need to buy an advance thirty-day visa, you can do so from the Cambodian Embassy in Bangkok (see p.189). This costs about B1000; apply before noon and you can collect your visa the following day after 5pm.

Laos and Vietnam

There are currently five points along the **Lao border** where it's permissible for tourists to cross into north and northeast Thailand: Houayxai (for Chiang Khong); Vientiane (for Nong Khai); Khammouan (aka Tha Khaek, for Nakhon Phanom); Savannakhet (for Mukdahan); and Pakxe (for Chong Mek). Provided you have the right visa, all these borders can be used as exits into Laos.

Visas are required for all non-Thai visitors to Laos. A fifteen-day **visa on arrival** can be bought for US$30 (plus two photos) at Vientiane Airport, Louang Phabang Airport, and all the above-listed land borders. However, these visas cost roughly the same but are valid for half the period of **visas bought in advance** from the Lao Embassy in Bangkok (see p.189), which issues thirty-day visas for around B1400, depending on nationality. For this, you need two passport photos; processing takes up to three days – or less than an hour if you pay an extra B200.

If you have the right Lao visa and Vietnamese exit stamp, you can travel **from Vietnam** to Thailand via Savannakhet in a matter of hours; you'll need to use Vietnam's Lao Bao border crossing, west of Dong Ha, where you can catch a bus to Savannakhet and then a ferry across the Mekong to Mukdahan (a bridge across the river near Mukdahan is due to be completed by the end of 2007, which should make the journey even quicker). All travellers into Vietnam need to buy a visa in advance. Thirty-day visas can take up to four working days to process at the embassy in Bangkok (see p.189) and cost about B1800, depending on your nationality.

Malaysia and Singapore

Travelling between Thailand and **Malaysia and Singapore** has in the past been a straightforward and very commonly used overland route, with plentiful connections by bus, minibus, share-taxi and train, most of them routed through the southern Thai city and transport hub of Hat Yai. However, because of the ongoing **violence in Thailand's deep south** (see p.485), all major Western governments are currently advising people not to travel to or through Songkhla, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces, unless essential. This encompasses Hat Yai and the following border crossings to and from Malaysia: at Padang Besar, on the main rail line connecting Butterworth in Malaysia (and, ultimately, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore) with Hat Yai and Bangkok; at Sungai Kolok, terminus of a railway line from Hat Yai and Bangkok, and at adjacent Ban Taba, both of which are connected by road to nearby Kota Bharu in Malaysia; and at the road crossings at Sadao, south of Hat Yai, and at Betong, south of Yala. (The routes towards Kota Bharu and Betong pass through particularly volatile territory, with martial law declared in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces; however, martial law is not in effect in Hat Yai itself nor the districts of Songkhla province, through which the Bangkok–Butterworth rail line and the Hat Yai–Sadao road pass.)

Nevertheless, the provinces of Trang and Satun on the west coast are not affected, and it's still perfectly possible to travel **overland via Satun**: by share-taxi between Satun town and Alor Setar via Thale Ban National Park, or by ferry between Satun's Thammalang pier and Kuala Perlis or the island of Langkawi (see p.502); or by irregular boats between Ko Lipe and Langkawi (see p.506). For up-to-the-minute advice, consult your government travel advisory (see p.69).

Most Western tourists can spend thirty days in Malaysia and fourteen days in Singapore without having bought a visa beforehand, and there are Thai embassies or consulates in Kuala Lumpur, Kota Bahru, Penang and Singapore (see p.34).

Visas

There are three main entry categories for visitors to Thailand. For all of them your passport must be valid for at least six months from the date of entry.

As **visa** requirements are often subject to change, you should always check before departure with a Thai embassy or consulate, a reliable travel agent, or on the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website at ⓦwww.mfa.go.th/web/12.php. For further, unofficial, details on related matters, such as the perils of overstaying your visa, go to ⓦwww.thaivisa.com.

Most Western passport holders (that includes citizens of the UK, Ireland, the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa) are allowed to enter the country for **stays of up to thirty days** without having to apply for a visa (officially termed the "tourist visa exemption"); the period of stay will be stamped into your passport by immigration officials upon entry. You're supposed to be able to somehow show proof of means of living while in the country (B10,000/person, B20,000/family), and in theory you may be put back on the next plane without it or sent back to get a sixty-day tourist visa from the nearest Thai embassy, but this is unheard of. It's easy to get a new thirty-day stay by hopping across the border into a neighbouring country and back, including taking a day-trip into Burma at Kaw Thaung (see p.358).

If you're fairly certain you may want to stay longer than thirty days, then from the outset you should apply for a **sixty-day tourist visa** from a Thai embassy or consulate, accompanying your application – which generally takes several days to process – with your passport and two photos. The sixty-day visa currently costs B1000 or equivalent (though it's a rip-off £25 in the UK); multiple-entry versions are available, costing B1000 per entry, which may be handy if you're going to be leaving and re-entering Thailand. Tourist visas are valid for three months, ie you must enter Thailand within three months of the visa being issued by the Thai embassy or consulate. Visa application forms can be downloaded from, for example, ⓦwww.thaiembassyuk.org.uk/visaapplicationform_internet.pdf.

Thai embassies also consider applications for **ninety-day non-immigrant visas** (B2000 or equivalent single-entry, B5000 multiple-entry) as long as you can offer a good reason for your visit, such as study or business (there are different categories of non-immigrant visa for which different levels of proof are needed). As it's quite a hassle to organize a ninety-day visa from outside the country (and generally not feasible for most tourists), it's generally easier, though more expensive, to apply for a thirty-day extension to your sixty-day visa once inside Thai borders.

It's not a good idea to **overstay** your visa limits. Once you're at the airport or the border, you'll have to pay a fine of B500/day before you can leave Thailand. More importantly, however, if you're in the country with an expired visa and you get involved with police or immigration officials for any reason, however trivial, they are obliged to take you to court, possibly imprison you, and deport you.

Extensions and re-entry permits

Thirty-day stays can be **extended** in Thailand for a further ten days, sixty-day tourist visas for a further seven days, at the discretion of officials; extensions cost B1900 and are issued over the counter at immigration offices (*kaan khao muang*; ⓦwww.immigration.go.th) in nearly every provincial capital – most offices ask for one or two photos as well, plus two photocopies of the main pages of your passport including your Thai arrival card, arrival stamp and visa. Many Khao San tour agents offer to get your visa extension for you, but beware: some are reportedly faking the stamps, which could get you into serious trouble. Immigration offices also issue **re-entry permits** (B1000 single re-entry, B3800 multiple) if you want to leave the country and come back again while maintaining the validity of your existing visa.

Thai embassies and consulates abroad

For a full listing of Thai diplomatic missions abroad, consult the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website at ⓦwww.mfa.go.th/web/10.php

Australia 111 Empire Circuit, Yarralumla, Canberra ACT 2600 ⓣ02/6273 1149, ⓦwww.thaiembassy.org.au; plus consulate at 131 Macquarrie St, Sydney, NSW 2000 ⓣ02/9241 2542–3, ⓦthaisydney.idx.com.au.

Canada 180 Island Park Drive, Ottawa, ON, K1Y 0A2 ⓣ613/722-4444, ⓦwww.magma.ca/~thaiott; plus consulate at 1040 Burrard St, Vancouver, BC, V6Z 2R9 ⓣ604/687-1143, ⓦwww.thaicongenvancouver.org.

Malaysia 206 Jalan Ampang, 50450 Kuala Lumpur

ⓣ03/2148 8222; plus consulates at 4426 Jalan Pengkalan Chepa, 15400 Kota Bharu ⓣ09/748 2545; and 1 Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, 10350 Penang ⓣ04/226 9484.

New Zealand 2 Cook St, PO Box 17226, Karori, Wellington 6005 ⓣ04/476 8618–9, ⓦwww.thaiembassynz.org.nz.

Singapore 370 Orchard Road, Singapore 238870 ⓣ6737 2158 or 6835 4991, ⓦwww.thaiembsingapore.org.

South Africa 428 Pretorius/Hill St, Arcadia, Pretoria 0083 ⓣ012/342 1600.

UK and Ireland 29–30 Queens Gate, London SW7 5JB ⓣ020/7589 2944, ⓦwww.thaiembassyuk.org.uk. Visa applications by post are not accepted here, but can be sent to various honorary consulates around the UK and Ireland – see ⓦwww.thaiembassyuk.org.uk/instruction.htm.

US 1024 Wisconsin Ave NW, Suite 401, Washington, DC 20007 ⓣ202/944-3600, ⓦwww.thaiembdc.org; plus consulates at 700 North Rush St, Chicago, IL 60611 ⓣ312/664-3129, ⓦwww.thaichicago.net; 351 E 52nd St, New York, NY 10022 ⓣ212/754-1770, ⓦwww.thaiconsulnewyork.com; and 611 North Larchmont Blvd, 2nd Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90004 ⓣ323/962-9574–7, ⓦwww.thai-la.net.

Health

Although Thailand's climate, wildlife and cuisine present Western travellers with fewer health worries than in many Asian destinations, it's as well to know in advance what the risks might be, and what preventive or curative measures you should take.

For a start, there's no need to bring huge supplies of non-prescription medicines with you, as Thai **pharmacies** (*raan khai yaa*; typically open daily 8.30am–8pm) are well stocked with local and international branded medicaments, and of course they are generally much less expensive than at home. Nearly all pharmacies are run by trained English-speaking pharmacists, who are usually the best people to talk to if your symptoms aren't acute enough to warrant seeing a doctor.

Hospital (*rong phayaabahn*) cleanliness and efficiency vary, but generally hygiene and healthcare standards are good and the ratio of medical staff to patients is considerably higher than in most parts of the West. As with head pharmacists, doctors speak English. Several Bangkok hospitals are highly regarded (see p.189), and all provincial capitals have at least one hospital: if you need to get to one, ask at your accommodation for advice on, and possibly transport to, the nearest or most suitable. In the event of a major health crisis, get someone to contact

A traveller's first-aid kit

Among items you might want to carry with you are:
- Antiseptic.
- Antihistamine cream.
- Plasters/band-aids.
- Lints and sealed bandages.
- Insect repellent, sunscreen and calamine lotion or similar, to soothe sunburn or insect bites.
- Imodium, Lomotil or Arret for emergency diarrhoea relief.
- Paracetamol/aspirin.
- Rehydration sachets.
- Hypodermic needles and sterilized skin wipes.

your embassy (see p.189) and insurance company – it may be best to get yourself transported to Bangkok or even home.

There have been outbreaks of **avian influenza** (**bird flu**) in domestic poultry and wild birds in Thailand which have led to a small number of human fatalities, believed to have arisen through close contact with infected poultry. There has been no evidence of human-to-human transmission in Thailand, and the risk to humans is believed to be very low. However, as a precaution, you should avoid visiting live animal markets and other places where you may come into close contact with birds, and ensure that poultry and egg dishes are thoroughly cooked.

Inoculations

There are no compulsory **inoculation** requirements for people travelling to Thailand from the West, but you should consult a doctor or other health professional, preferably at least four weeks in advance of your trip, for the latest information on recommended immunizations. Most doctors strongly advise vaccinations or boosters against polio, tetanus, typhoid, diphtheria and hepatitis A, and in some cases they might also recommend protecting yourself against Japanese B encephalitis, rabies, hepatitis B and tuberculosis. There is currently no vaccine against malaria; for information on prophylaxis, see below. If you forget to have all your inoculations before leaving home, or don't leave yourself sufficient time, you can get them in Bangkok at, for example, the Thai Red Cross Society's Queen Saovabha Institute or the Travmin Medical Centre; see p.189 for details.

Mosquito-borne diseases

Mosquitoes in Thailand spread not only malaria, but also diseases such as dengue fever, especially during the rainy season. The main message, therefore, is to **avoid being bitten** by mosquitoes. You should smother yourself and your clothes in **mosquito repellent** containing the chemical compound DEET, reapplying regularly (shops, guest houses and department stores all over Thailand stock it, but if you want the highest-strength repellent, or convenient roll-ons or sprays, do your shopping before you leave home). DEET is strong stuff, and if you have sensitive skin, a natural alternative is citronella (available in the UK as Mosi-guard), made from a blend of eucalyptus oils.

At night you should sleep either under a **mosquito net** sprayed with DEET or in a bedroom with **mosquito screens** across the windows (or in an enclosed air-con room). Accommodation in tourist spots nearly always provides screens or a net (check both for holes), but if you're planning to go way off the beaten track or want the security of having your own mosquito net just in case, wait until you get to Bangkok to buy one, where department stores sell them for much less than you'd pay in the West. Plug-in insecticide vaporizers, knock-down insect sprays and mosquito coils – also widely available in Thailand – help keep the insects at bay; electronic "buzzers" are useless.

Malaria

Thailand is **malarial**, with the disease being carried by mosquitoes that bite from dusk to dawn, but the risks involved vary across the country.

There is a significant risk of malaria, mainly in rural and forested areas, in a narrow strip along the **borders with Burma, Laos and Cambodia** (including Ko Chang; see p.240 for details). The only anti-malarial drugs that are currently likely to be effective in these areas are **Doxycycline** and **Malarone**, whose use should be discussed with your travel health adviser, especially as prophylaxis advice can change from year to year.

Elsewhere in Thailand the risk of malaria is considered to be so low that anti-malarial tablets are not advised.

The **signs of malaria** are often similar to flu, but are very variable. The incubation period for malignant malaria, which can be fatal, is usually 7–28 days, but it can take up to a year for symptoms of the benign form to occur. The most important symptom is a raised temperature of at least 38°C beginning a week or more after the first potential exposure to malaria: if you suspect anything, go to a hospital or clinic immediately.

Dengue fever

Dengue fever, a debilitating and occasionally fatal viral disease that is particularly prevalent during and just after the rainy season, is on the increase throughout tropical Asia, and is endemic to many areas of Thailand, especially in the south. Unlike malaria, dengue fever is spread by mosquitoes that can bite during daylight hours, so you should also use mosquito repellent during the day. Ko Pha Ngan seems to suffer a higher than usual incidence of dengue fever. Symptoms include fever, headaches, fierce joint and muscle pain ("breakbone fever" is another name for dengue), and possibly a rash, and usually develop between five and eight days after being bitten.

There is no vaccine against dengue fever; the only treatment is lots of rest, liquids and paracetamol (or any other acetaminophen painkiller, not aspirin), though more serious cases may require hospitalization.

Other health problems

Wearing protective clothing is a good idea when **swimming** or **snorkelling**: a T-shirt will stop you from getting sunburnt in the water, while long trousers can guard against coral grazes. Should you scrape your skin on coral, wash the wound thoroughly with boiled water, apply antiseptic and keep protected until healed.

Thailand's seas are home to a few dangerous creatures that you should look out for, notably **jellyfish**, which tend to be washed towards the beach by rough seas during the monsoon season. All manner of stinging and non-stinging jellyfish can be found in Thailand – as a general rule, those with the longest tentacles tend to have the worst stings – but reports of serious incidents are rare; before swimming at this time of the year, ask around at your resort or at a local dive shop to see if there have been any sightings of poisonous varieties. You also need to be wary of poisonous **sea snakes**, **sea urchins** and a couple of less conspicuous species – **stingrays**, which often lie buried in the sand, and **stonefish**, whose potentially lethal venomous spikes are easily stepped on because the fish look like stones and lie motionless on the sea bed.

If **stung or bitten** you should always seek medical advice as soon as possible, but there are a few ways of alleviating the pain or administering your own first aid in the meantime. If you're stung by a jellyfish, wash the affected area with salt water (not fresh water) and, if possible, with vinegar (failing that, ammonia, citrus fruit juice or even urine may do the trick), and try to remove the fragments of tentacles from the skin with a gloved hand, forceps, thick cloth or credit card. The best way to minimize the risk of stepping on the toxic spines of sea urchins, stingrays and stonefish is to wear thick-soled shoes, though these cannot provide total protection; sea urchin spikes should be removed after softening the skin with ointment, though some people recommend applying urine to help dissolve the spines;

Carrying essential medications

Make sure that you take sufficient supplies of any **essential medications** and carry the complete supply with you whenever you travel – including on public transport – in case of loss or theft (or possibly carry more than you need and split it between your baggage). You should also carry a prescription that includes the **generic name** in case of emergency. It might also be a good idea to carry a **doctor's letter** about your drugs prescriptions with you at all times, partly as this will ensure you don't get hauled up for narcotics transgressions when passing through customs.

If your medication has to be kept cool, buy a thermal insulation bag and a couple of freezer blocks before you leave home. That way you can refreeze one of the two blocks every day, while the other is in use; staff in most hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and even some bars should be happy to let you use their freezer compartment for a few hours. If you use needles and syringes, you should also take a small sharps bin with you, as garbage disposal in Thailand is haphazard and your used syringes might harm someone.

for stingray and stonefish stings, alleviate the pain by immersing the wound in hot water while awaiting help.

In the case of a **poisonous snake bite**, don't try sucking out the poison or applying a tourniquet: wrap up and immobilize the bitten limb and try to stay still and calm until medical help arrives; all provincial hospitals in Thailand carry supplies of antivenins. For more on Thai snakes, see p.532.

Rabies

Rabies is widespread in Thailand, mainly carried by dogs (between four and seven percent of stray dogs in Bangkok are reported to be rabid), but also cats and monkeys. It is transmitted by bites, scratches or even licks. Dogs are everywhere in Thailand and even if kept as pets they're never very well cared for; hopefully their mangy appearance will discourage the urge to pat them, as you should steer well clear of them. Rabies is invariably fatal if the patient waits until symptoms begin, though modern vaccines and treatments are very effective and deaths are rare. The important thing is, if you are bitten, licked or scratched by an animal, to vigorously clean the wound with soap and disinfect it, preferably with something containing iodine, and to seek medical advice regarding treatment right away.

Worms and flukes

Worms can be picked up through the soles of your feet, so avoid going barefoot. They can also be ingested by eating undercooked meat, and liver **flukes** by eating raw or undercooked freshwater fish. Worms which cause schistosomiasis (bilharziasis) by attaching themselves to your bladder or intestines can be found in freshwater rivers and lakes. The risk of contracting this disease is low, but you should generally avoid swimming in freshwater lakes.

Digestive problems

By far the most common travellers' complaint in Thailand, **digestive troubles** are often caused by contaminated food and water, or sometimes just by an overdose of unfamiliar foodstuffs. Break your system in gently by avoiding excessively spicy curries and too much raw fruit in the first few days, and then use your common sense about choosing where and what to eat: if you stick to the most crowded restaurants and noodle stalls you should be perfectly safe (for more on food hygiene, see p.51). You need to be more rigorous about **drinking water**, though: stick to bottled water (even when brushing your teeth), which is sold everywhere, or else opt for boiled water or tea.

Stomach trouble usually manifests itself as simple **diarrhoea**, which should clear up without medical treatment within three to seven days and is best combated by drinking lots of fluids. If this doesn't work, you're in danger of getting **dehydrated** and should take some kind of rehydration solution, either a commercial sachet of ORS (oral rehydration solution), sold in all Thai pharmacies, or a do-it-yourself version, which can be made by adding a handful of sugar and a pinch of salt to every litre of boiled or bottled water (soft drinks are not a viable alternative). If you can eat, avoid fatty foods.

Anti-diarrhoeal agents such as **Imodium** are useful for blocking you up on long bus journeys, but only attack the symptoms and may prolong infections; an antibiotic such as ciprofloxacin, however, can often reduce a typical attack of self-limiting traveller's diarrhoea to one day. If the diarrhoea persists for a week or more, or if you have blood or mucus in your stools, or an accompanying fever, go to a doctor or hospital.

HIV and AIDS

AIDS is widespread in Thailand, primarily because of the sex trade (see p.156). **Condoms** (*meechai*) are sold in pharmacies, department stores, hairdressers, and even street markets.

Should you need to have treatment involving an **injection** at a hospital, try to check that the needle has been sterilized first; this is not always practicable, however, so you might consider carrying your own syringes. Due to rigorous screening methods, Thailand's medical blood supply is now considered safe from HIV/AIDS infection.

Medical resources for travellers

UK and Ireland

British Airways Travel Clinics London ⓣ0845/600 2236, ⓦwww.ba.com/travel/healthclinintro.

Hospital for Tropical Diseases Travel Clinic London ⓣ020/7387-5000 or ⓣ0845/155-5000, ⓦwww.thehtd.org.

MASTA (Medical Advisory Service for Travellers Abroad) UK ⓦwww.masta.org or ⓣ0113/238-7575 for the nearest clinic.

NHS Travel Health Website ⓦwww.fitfortravel.scot.nhs.uk.

Royal College of Surgeons Travel Health Centre Dublin ⓣ01/402 2337.

Travel Medicine Services Belfast ⓣ028/9031 5220.

Tropical Medical Bureau Dublin ⓣ1850/487 674, ⓦwww.tmb.ie.

US and Canada

Canadian Society for International Health ⓦwww.csih.org. Extensive list of travel health centres.

CDC ⓦwww.cdc.gov/travel. Official US government travel health site.

International Society for Travel Medicine ⓦwww.istm.org. Lists travel health clinics.

Australia, New Zealand and South Africa

Travellers' Medical and Vaccination Centre ⓦwww.tmvc.com.au, in Australia ⓣ1300/658 844. Lists travel clinics in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

Getting around

Travel in Thailand is both inexpensive and efficient, if not always speedy. Unless you travel by plane, long-distance journeys in Thailand can be arduous, especially if a shoestring budget restricts you to hard seats and no air-conditioning.

Nonetheless, the wide range of transport options makes travelling around Thailand easier than elsewhere in Southeast Asia. **Buses** are fast and frequent, and can be quite luxurious; **trains** are slower but safer and offer more chance of sleeping during overnight trips; moreover, if travelling by day you're likely to follow a more scenic route by rail than by road. Inter-town **songthaews**, **share-taxis** and air-con **minibuses** are handy, and **ferries** provide easy access to all major islands. Local transport comes in all sorts of permutations, both public and chartered.

For an idea of the frequency and duration of bus, train, air and ferry services, check the **travel details** section at the end of each chapter.

Inter-town buses

Buses, overall the most convenient way of getting around the country, come in two main categories: **ordinary** (*rot thammadaa*; orange-coloured) and **air-con** (*rot air* or *rot thua*; usually blue). Ordinary and many air-con buses are run by Baw Khaw Saw, the government transport company, while privately owned air-con buses also ply the most popular long-distance routes. Be warned that long-distance overnight buses, particularly the private air-con buses, seem to be involved in more than their fair share of accidents; because of this, some travellers prefer to do the overnight journeys by train and then make a shorter bus connection to their destination.

Ordinary buses

Ordinary buses are incredibly inexpensive and cover most short-range routes between main towns (up to 150km), running very frequently during daylight hours. Each bus is staffed by a team of two or three – the driver, the fare collector and the optional "stop" and "go" yeller – who often personalize the vehicle with stereo systems, stickers, jasmine garlands and the requisite Buddha image or amulet.

With an entertaining team and eye-catching scenery, journeys can be fun, but there are drawbacks. For a start, the teams work on a commission basis, so they pack as many people in as possible and might hang around for thirty minutes after they're due to leave in the hope of cramming in a few extra. They also stop so often that their average speed of 60kph can only be achieved by hurtling along at breakneck speeds between pick-ups, often propelled by amphetamine-induced craziness. To flag down an ordinary bus from the roadside you should wait at the nearest **bus shelter**, or **sala**, usually located at intervals along the main long-distance bus route through town or on the fringes of any decent-sized settlement, for example on the main highway that skirts the edge of town. Where there is only a bus shelter on the "wrong" side of the road, you can be sure that buses travelling in both directions will stop there for any waiting passengers. If you're in the middle of nowhere with no *sala* in sight, any ordinary bus should stop for you if you flag it down.

Air-con buses

Most Thais making journeys of 100km or more choose to travel by **air-con bus**, and on some routes non-air-con options have anyway been phased out. On the busiest routes air-con services depart every 20–30 minutes, while on less popular journeys there may be only three or four a day. Whatever the frequency, most air-con services stop just a few times en route and are usually quite comfortable: passengers are generally allotted specific seats, and on the longest journeys get blankets, snacks and nonstop videos.

On some routes you have a choice of three or even four classes of air-con bus, with the **second-class** service (distinguished by an orange flash on their blue livery and the number "2" appended to the vehicle and route number) being the slowest, cheapest and least comfortable, and the **VIP** (or even "super VIP") services having the fewest seats (generally 24–32 instead of 44) and more leg room for reclining.

Air-con services can cost up to twice as much as the ordinary buses (two or three times as much for VIP buses). Not all air-con buses have toilets, so it's always worth using bus station facilities before you board; and make sure you have some warm clothes, as temperatures can get chilly, even with the blanket.

On a lot of long-distance routes **private air-con buses** are indistinguishable from government ones and operate out of the same Baw Khaw Saw bus terminals. The major private companies, such as Nakhonchai (Ⓣ02 936 3355, Ⓦwww.nca.co.th), have roughly similar fares, though naturally with more scope for price variation, and offer comparable facilities and standards of service. The opposite is unfortunately true of a number of the smaller private companies, several of which have a poor reputation for service and comfort, but attract farang customers with bargain fares and convenient timetables. The long-distance tour buses that run **from Thanon Khao San** in Banglamphu to Surat Thani are a case in point; travellers on this route frequently complain about shabby furnishings, ineffective air-conditioning, unhelpful (even aggressive) drivers and a frightening lack of safety awareness – and there are frequent reports of theft from luggage, too. If you're planning to travel to Surat, you are strongly recommended to travel with the government or private bus companies from Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal (who have a reputation with their regular Thai customers to maintain) or to go by train instead – the extra comfort and peace of mind are well worth the extra baht.

Tickets and timetables

Tickets for all buses can be bought from the departure terminals, but for ordinary buses it's normal to buy them on board. Air-con buses may operate from a separate station or office, and tickets for the more popular routes should be booked a day in advance. As a rough indication of **fares**, a trip from Bangkok to Surat Thani, a distance of 640km, costs B530–700 for VIP, B450 for first-class air-con and B350 for second-class air-con.

Long-distance buses often depart in clusters around the same time (early morning or late at night for example), leaving a gap of five or more hours during the day with no services at all. Local TAT offices often keep up-to-date bus **timetables** in English, or you can consult Ⓦwww.transport.co.th/Eng/HomeEnglish.htm for services in and out of Bangkok. Or go to the bus terminal the day before you want to leave and check with staff there. That said, if you turn up at a bus terminal in the morning for a medium-length journey (150–300km), you're almost always guaranteed to be on your way within two hours.

Songthaews, share-taxis and air-conditioned minibuses

In rural areas, the bus network is supplemented – or even substantially replaced – by **songthaews** (literally "two rows"), which are open-ended vans (or occasionally cattle-trucks) onto which the drivers squash as many passengers as possible on two facing benches, leaving latecomers to swing off the running board at the back. As well as their essential role within towns (see "Local Transport" on p.43), songthaews ply set routes from larger towns out to their surrounding suburbs and villages, and, where there's no call for a regular bus service, between small towns: some have destinations written on in Thai, but few are numbered. In most towns you'll find the songthaew "terminal" near the market; to pick one up between destinations just flag it down. To indicate to the driver that you want to get out, the normal practice is to rap hard with a coin on the metal railings as you approach the spot (or press the bell if there is one).

In the deep south (see p.487) they do things with a little more style – **share-taxis**, often clapped-out old limos, connect all the major towns, though they are inexorably being replaced by more comfortable **air-conditioned minibuses**. Similar private air-con minibuses are now cropping up on popular routes elsewhere in the country (eg Pattaya–Ban Phe and Ranong–Chumphon). Air-con minibuses generally depart frequently and cover the distance faster than the ordinary bus service, but can be uncomfortably cramped when full and are not ideal for travellers with huge rucksacks.

In many cases, long-distance songthaews and air-con minibuses will drop you at an exact address (for example a particular guesthouse) if you warn them far enough in advance – it's generally an expected part of the service. As a rule, the **cost** of inter-town songthaews is comparable to that of air-con buses, that of air-con minibuses perhaps a shade more.

Train information

For 24hr **train information**, phone the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) in Bangkok on Ⓣ02 220 4334, or on its free Hotline Ⓣ1690. The SRT website (Ⓦwww.railway.co.th or Ⓦwww.thailandrailway.com) carries English-language timetables and gives a breakdown of ticket prices from Bangkok.

Trains

Managed by the State Railway of Thailand (SRT), the **rail** network consists of four main lines from Bangkok and a few branch lines. The **Southern Line** extends via Hua Hin, Chumphon and Surat Thani, with spurs off to Trang and Nakhon Si Thammarat, to Hat Yai (see the travel warning on p.485), where it branches: one line continues down the west coast of Malaysia, via Butterworth, where you change trains for Kuala Lumpur and Singapore; the other heads down the eastern side of the peninsula to Sungai Kolok on the Thailand–Malaysia border (20km from Pasir Mas on Malaysia's interior railway). The **Eastern Line** also has two branches, one of which runs from Bangkok to Aranyaprathet on the Cambodian border, the other of which connects Bangkok with Si Racha and Pattaya.

Fares depend on the class of seat, whether or not you want air-conditioning, and on the speed of the train; those quoted here exclude the "speed" supplements, which are discussed below. Hard, wooden or thinly padded third-class seats cost about the same as an ordinary bus (Bangkok–Surat Thani B227, or B297 with air-conditioning), and are fine for about three hours, after which numbness sets in. For longer journeys you'd be wise to opt for the padded and often reclining seats in second class (Bangkok–Surat B368, or B478 with air-conditioning). On long-distance trains, you also usually have the option of second-class berths (Bangkok–Surat B498–568, or B658–748 with air-conditioning), with day seats that convert into comfortable curtained-off bunks in the evening; lower bunks, which are more expensive than upper, have a few cubic centimetres more of space, a little more shade from the lights in the carriage, and a window. Female passengers can sometimes request a berth in an all-female section of a carriage. Travelling first class (Bangkok–Surat B1179) means a two-person air-con sleeping compartment, complete with washbasin.

There are several different **types of train**: slowest of all is the third-class-only Ordinary service, which is generally (but not always) available only on short and medium-length journeys and has no speed supplement. Next comes the misleadingly named Rapid train (B60 supplement), a trip on which from Bangkok to Surat Thani, for example, takes twelve or thirteen hours; the Express (B80 supplement) which does the same route in around twelve hours; the Special Express (B100 supplement) covers the ground in around eleven hours; and fastest of all is the Special Express Diesel Railcar (B120 supplement), which does the journey in nine or ten hours. Note that nearly all long-distance trains have **dining cars**, and rail staff will also bring meals to your seat.

Booking at least one day in advance is strongly recommended for second- and first-class seats on all lengthy journeys, and sleepers should be booked as far in advance as possible (all reservations open thirty days before departure). It's possible to make bookings for any journey in Thailand at the train station in any major town, or by **email** (Ⓔpassenger-ser@railway.co.th) or **fax** (Ⓕ02 226 6068) to the SRT, at least fifteen days before the start of your journey; you should receive an email confirmation of your booking and then pay for your tickets at the departure station at least an hour before leaving. Otherwise, you can arrange advance bookings over the Internet with reputable Thai travel agencies such as Traveller 2000 (Ⓦwww.traveller2000.com) or Thai Focus (Ⓦwww.thaifocus.com). For details on how to book trains out of Bangkok **in person**, see p.185.

The SRT publishes clear and fairly accurate free **timetables** in English, detailing types of trains and classes available on each route, as well as fares; the best place to get hold of them is over the counter at Bangkok's Hualamphong Station or, if you're lucky, the TAT office in Bangkok. These English-only timetables cover the services that the SRT think will appeal to tourists; a wider range of trains are shown on part-Thai, part-English national timetables, and there are more detailed local timetables covering, for example, the Bangkok–Ayutthaya route via Don Muang Airport.

The SRT also sells twenty-day **rail passes** (available only in Thailand), covering unlimited train journeys in second- (or third-) class seats for B1500, or B3000 with all supplements thrown in. However, unless you're on a whistle-stop tour of all four corners of the country, the rail network is not really extensive enough to make them pay.

Ferries

Regular **ferries** connect all major islands with the mainland, and for the vast majority of crossings you simply buy your ticket on board. Safety standards are generally just about adequate but there have been a small number of sinkings in recent years – avoid travelling on boats that are clearly overloaded or in poor condition. In tourist areas competition ensures that prices are kept low, and fares tend to vary with the speed of the crossing, if anything: thus Chumphon–Ko Tao costs between B300 (6hr) and B550 (2hr).

On the east coast and the Andaman coast boats generally operate a reduced service during the monsoon season (May–Oct), when the more remote spots become inaccessible. Ferries in the Samui archipelago are fairly constant year-round. Details on island connections are given in the relevant chapters.

Flights

The domestic arm of **Thai Airways** (in Bangkok Ⓣ1566, elsewhere in Thailand Ⓣ02 1566, Ⓦwww.thaiair.com) still has the lion's share of the internal flight network, which extends to all extremities of the country – around two dozen airports. However, with deregulation, several smaller airlines have now broken into the volatile market, including one or two cheap, no-frills companies. **Bangkok Airways** (ⓣ1771 or 02 265 5555, ⓦwww.bangkokair.com) is still Thai Airways' main competitor at home, covering useful routes such as Bangkok–Ko Samui, Bangkok–Trat, Bangkok–Phuket, and a Pattaya–Ko Samui–Phuket triangle.

Among the newcomers on the scene, **Air Asia** (ⓣ02 515 9999, ⓦwww.airasia.com) currently has flights from Bangkok to Krabi, Phuket and Surat Thani; **Nok Air** (ⓣ1318 or 02 900 9955, ⓦwww.nokair.com) covers Bangkok to Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phuket and Trang; **One-Two-Go** (in Bangkok ⓣ1126, elsewhere in Thailand ⓣ1141, ext 1126, ⓦwww.fly12go.com), operated by Orient Thai Airlines, has flights from Bangkok to Krabi, Phuket and Surat Thani; and **PB Air** (ⓣ02 261 0220–8, ⓦwww.pbair.com) offers flights from Bangkok to Krabi and Nakhon Si Thammarat. Note that these routings change surprisingly frequently and that at the very minor airports, schedules are erratic and flights are sometimes cancelled, so always check ahead.

To give an idea of **fares**, on the Bangkok–Phuket route Bangkok Airways typically charge around B2500 one-way (though look out for occasional promotional fares on their website), while on certain Air Asia flights to Phuket you can get seats for around B1300.

If you're planning to use the internal network a lot, you can save money by buying an **airpass**, which must be bought outside Thailand from one of the airlines' offices or a travel agent. Of the two available, Bangkok Airways' Discovery Airpass is the easier to use: you buy between three and six flight coupons, generally for US$50 each (Bangkok–Ko Samui costs US$60), confirming the first flight before departure, though the others can be left open. Thai Airways' Discover Thailand Airpass covers three one-way flights for US$169; you fix the routes when you buy the pass, but dates of travel can be changed in Thailand. Up to five additional flights can be added for US$59 each.

Local transport

Most sizeable towns have some kind of **local transport system**, consisting of songthaews or sometimes longtail boats. For details of Bangkok's bus network, see p.99.

Songthaews

Within medium-sized and large towns, the main transport role is generally played by **songthaews**. The size and shape of vehicle used varies from town to town – and in some places they're known as "tuk-tuks" from the noise they make, not to be confused with the smaller tuk-tuks, described below, that operate as private taxis – but all have the tell-tale two facing benches in the back. In one or two towns, such as Pattaya, songthaews follow fixed routes; more often they act as communal taxis, picking up a number of people who are going in roughly the same direction and taking each of them right to their destination. To hail a songthaew just flag it down, and to indicate that you want to get out, either rap hard with a coin on the metal railings, or ring the bell if there is one. Fares within towns range between B10 and B20, depending on distance.

Longtail boats

Wherever there's a decent public waterway, there'll be a **longtail boat** ready to ferry you along it. Another great Thai trademark, these elegant, streamlined boats are powered by deafening diesel engines – sometimes custom-built, more often adapted from cars or trucks – which drive a propeller mounted on a long shaft that is swivelled for steering. Longtails carry between ten and twenty passengers: in Bangkok and Krabi the majority follow fixed routes, but elsewhere they're for hire at about B200 an hour per boat.

Taxi services

Taxis also come in many guises, and in bigger towns you can sometimes choose between taking a tuk-tuk, a samlor and a motorbike taxi. The one thing common to all modes of chartered transport, bar Bangkok's metered taxis (see p.105), is that you must establish the **fare** beforehand: although drivers nearly always pitch their first offers too high, they do calculate with traffic and time of day in mind, as well as according to distance – if successive drivers scoff at your price, you know you've got it wrong.

Tuk-tuks

Named after the noise of its excruciatingly unsilenced engine, the three-wheeled, open-sided **tuk-tuk** is the classic Thai vehicle. Painted in primary colours, tuk-tuks blast their way round towns and cities on two-stroke engines, zipping around faster than any car and taking corners on two wheels. They aren't as dangerous as they look though, and can be an exhilarating way to get around, as long as you're not too fussy about exhaust fumes. Fares come in at around B50 for a medium-length journey (more like B100 in Bangkok) regardless of the number of passengers – three is the safe maximum, though six is not uncommon. See p.106 for advice on how to avoid being ripped off by Bangkok tuk-tuk drivers.

Samlors

Tuk-tuks are also sometimes known as samlors (literally "three wheels"), but the original **samlors** are tricycle rickshaws propelled by pedal power alone. Slower and a great deal more stately than tuk-tuks, samlors still operate in one or two towns around the country. Forget any qualms you may have about being pedalled around by another human being: samlor drivers' livelihoods depend on having a constant supply of passengers, so your most ethical option is to hop on and not scrimp on the fare.

A further permutation is the motorized samlors, where the driver relies on a motorbike rather than a bicycle to propel passengers to their destination. They look much the same as cycle samlors, but often sound as noisy as tuk-tuks.

Motorbike taxis

Even faster and more precarious than tuk-tuks, **motorbike taxis** feature both in towns and in out-of-the-way places. In towns – where the drivers are identified by coloured, numbered vests – they have the advantage of being able to dodge traffic jams, but are obviously only really suitable for the single traveller, and motorbike taxis aren't the easiest mode of transport if you're carrying luggage. In remote spots, on the other hand, they're often the only alternative to hitching or walking, and are especially useful for getting between bus stops on main roads and to national parks or ancient ruins.

Within towns motorbike-taxi fares can start at B10 for short journeys, but for trips to the outskirts the cost rises steeply – about B150–200 for a twenty-kilometre round trip.

Vehicle rental

Despite first impressions, a high accident rate and the obvious mayhem that characterizes Bangkok's roads, **driving** yourself around Thailand can be fairly straightforward, and many roads in the south are remarkably uncongested. Major routes are clearly signed in English, though this only applies to some minor roads; unfortunately there is no perfect English-language map to compensate (see p.78).

Outside the capital, its immediate environs and the eastern seaboard, local drivers are generally considerate and unaggressive; they very rarely use their horns for example, and will often indicate and even swerve away when it's safe for you to overtake. The most inconsiderate and dangerous road-users in Thailand are bus drivers and lorry drivers, many of whom drive ludicrously fast, hog the road, race round bends on the wrong side of the road and use their horns remorselessly; worse still, many of them are tanked up on amphetamines, which makes them quite literally fearless.

Bus and lorry drivers are at their worst after dark (many of them only drive then), so you are strongly advised **never to drive at night** – a further hazard being the inevitable stream of unlit bicycles and mopeds in and around built-up areas, as well as poorly signed roadworks, which are often not made safe or blocked off from unsuspecting traffic.

As for local **rules of the road**, Thais drive on the left, and the speed limit is 60km/h within built-up areas and 90km/h outside them. Beyond that, there are few rules that are generally followed – you'll need to keep your concentration up and expect the unexpected from fellow road-users. Watch out especially for vehicles pulling straight out of minor roads, when you might expect them to give way. An oncoming vehicle flashing its lights means it's coming through no matter what; a right indicator signal from the car in front usually means it's not safe for you to overtake, while a left indicator signal usually means that it is safe to do so.

Theoretically, foreigners need an international **driver's licence** to rent any kind of vehicle, but most companies accept national licences, and the smaller operations (especially motorbike rentals) have been known not to ask for any kind of proof whatsoever. A popular current rip-off, notably on Ko Pha Ngan and Ko Tao, is for small agents to charge renters exorbitant amounts for any minor damage to a jeep or motorbike, even paint chips, that they find on return – they'll claim that it's very expensive to get a new part shipped over from the mainland, but for something as small as a paint chip it's unlikely that they're actually going to replace a panel or whatever. Check out any vehicle carefully before renting; on the two islands mentioned, we've tried to recommend agents who don't indulge in this practice.

Petrol (*nam man*, which can also mean oil) costs around B26 a litre. The big fuel stations are the least costly places to fill up (*hai taem*), and many of these also have toilets and simple restaurants, though some of the more decrepit-looking fuel stations on the main highways only sell diesel. Most small villages have easy-to-spot roadside huts where the fuel is pumped out of a large barrel.

Renting a car

If you decide to **rent a car**, go to a reputable dealer, such as Avis, Budget or Hertz (see below), or a rental company recommended by TAT, and make sure you get insurance from them. There are international car-rental places at many airports, including Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi, which is not a bad place to kick off, as you're on the edge of the city and within fairly easy, signposted reach of the major regional highways; returning a car to Suvarnabhumi, however, is less straightforward, because of the jumble of roads and flyovers on the way into Bangkok – try to get detailed instructions, or a map, when you start your rental.

Car-rental places in provincial capitals and resorts are listed in the relevant accounts in this book. The price of a small car at a reputable company is generally about B1500 per day. In some parts of the country, where there are no dedicated car-rental agencies, you'll still be able to rent a car or air-con minibus with driver, for around B1800 per day.

Jeeps are a lot more popular with farangs, especially on beach resorts and islands like Pattaya, Phuket and Ko Samui, but they're notoriously **dangerous**; a huge number of tourists manage to roll their jeeps on steep hillsides and sharp bends. Jeep rental usually works out somewhere between B800 and B1200 per day.

International companies will accept your credit-card details as surety, but smaller agents will often ask for a deposit of at least B2000 and/or will want to hold on to your passport.

Car rental agencies

Avis US ⓣ1-800/230-4898, Canada ⓣ1-800/272-5871, UK ⓣ0870/606 0100, Republic of Ireland ⓣ021/428 1111, Australia ⓣ13 63 33 or 02/9353 9000, New Zealand ⓣ09/526 2847 or 0800/655 111, South Africa ⓣ0861/113748, ⓦwww.avis.com.

Budget US ⓣ1-800/527-0700, Canada ⓣ1-800/268-8900, UK ⓣ08701/565656, Republic of Ireland ⓣ09/0662 7711, Australia ⓣ1300/362 848, New Zealand ⓣ0800/283-438, South Africa ⓣ011/398 0123 or 0861/016622, ⓦwww.budget.com.

Hertz US ⓣ1-800/654-3131, Canada ⓣ1-800/263-0600, UK ⓣ020/7026-0077, Republic of Ireland ⓣ01/870-5777, Australia ⓣ08/9921-4052, New Zealand ⓣ0800/654 321, South Africa ⓣ021/935 4800, ⓦwww.hertz.com.

National US ⓣ1-800/CAR-RENT, UK ⓣ0870/400-4581, Ireland ⓣ021/432 0755, Australia ⓣ02/13 10 45, New Zealand ⓣ03/366-5574, South Africa ⓣ011/570 1900 or 0800/011323, ⓦwww.nationalcar.com.

Renting a motorbike

One of the best ways of exploring the countryside is to **rent a motorbike**. Two-seater 80cc bikes with automatic gears are best if you've never ridden a motorbike before, but aren't really suited for long slogs. If you're going to hit the dirt roads you'll certainly need something more powerful, like a 125cc trail bike. These have the edge in gear choice and are the best bikes for steep slopes, though an inexperienced rider may find these machines a handful; the less widely available 125cc road bikes are easier to control and much cheaper on fuel.

Rental **prices** for the day usually work out at somewhere between B100 (for a fairly beat-up 80cc) and B350 (for a good trail bike), though you can bargain for a discount on a long rental. As with cars, the renters will often ask for a deposit and your passport or credit-card details, though you're unlikely to have to prove that you've ridden a bike before. Insurance is not often available, so it's a good idea to make sure your travel insurance covers you for possible mishaps.

Before signing anything, **check the bike** thoroughly – test the brakes, look for oil leaks, check the treads and the odometer, and make sure the chain isn't stretched too tight (a tight chain is more likely to break) – and preferably take it for a test run. As you will have to pay an inflated price for any damage when you get back, make a note on the contract of any defects such as broken mirrors, indicators and so on. Make sure you know what kind of fuel the bike takes as well.

As far as **equipment** goes, a helmet is essential – most rental places provide poorly made ones, but they're better than nothing. Helmets are obligatory on all motorbike journeys, and the law is often rigidly enforced with on-the-spot fines in major tourist resorts. You'll need sunglasses if your helmet doesn't have a visor. As well as being more culturally appropriate, long trousers, a long-sleeved top and decent shoes will provide a second skin if you go over, which most people do at some stage. Pillions should wear long trousers to avoid getting nasty burns from the exhaust. For the sake of stability, leave most of your luggage in baggage storage and pack as small a bag as possible, strapping it tightly to the bike with bungy cords – these are usually provided. Once on the road, oil the chain at least every other day, keep the radiator topped up and fill up with oil every 300km or so.

For expert **advice** on motorbike travel in Thailand, check out David Unkovich's website (ⓦwww.gt-rider.com), which covers everything from how to ship a bike to Thailand to which are the best off-road touring routes in the country.

Cycling

Though long-distance **cycling** is not a popular Thai pastime, an increasing number of travellers are choosing to explore the country by bicycle. If you don't want to import your own bike, you can buy or rent one locally or join an organized tour. Most Thai roads are in good condition and clearly signposted. Traffic is reasonably well behaved and personal safety is not a major concern as long as you "ride to survive". There are bike shops in nearly every town, offering cheap, basic equipment and repairs, and you are rarely more than 25km from food, water and accommodation. Overall, the best time to cycle is during the cool, dry season from November to February and the least good from April to July (see p.11 for climate information).

Bangkok-based Spice Roads (ⓣ02 712 5305, ⓦwww.spiceroads.com) and Bike & Travel (ⓣ02 990 0274, ⓦwww.cyclingthailand.com) both run varied programmes of **escorted bike tours** in Thailand. Local one-day cycle tours and **bike-rental outlets** (B30–50/day) are listed throughout this book.

Cycling routes

When designing your itinerary, plan on an average of 50km per day, based on 100-kilometre cycling days with rest days every other day; see p.77 for advice on maps. The main arteries carry a high volume of traffic and are to be avoided, if possible. The secondary **roads** (distinguished by their three-digit numbers) are paved but carry far less traffic and are the preferred cycling option. The tertiary roads are unpaved and turn to mud during the rainy season.

The traffic into and out of **Bangkok** is dense so it's worth hopping on a bus or train for the first 50–100km to your starting point. The Bangkok Skytrain and city trains, intercity air-con buses, taxis and Thai domestic aeroplanes (no bike box required) will **carry your bike** free of charge. The Bangkok subway does not allow bikes. Intercity trains will only transport your bike (for a fare – about the price of a person) if there is a luggage carriage attached, unless you dismantle it and carry it as luggage in the compartment with you. Intercity non-air-con buses and songthaews will carry your bike on the roof for a fare (about the price of a person).

Heading **south** out of Bangkok, the picturesque and mainly flat route to **Surat Thani** (minimum 650km) runs along the Gulf coast. It's best to begin riding in **Phetchaburi** or **Hua Hin** and avoid Highway 4/41 where possible. The Andaman coast of the peninsula is more spectacular and sometimes mountainous, leading down through **Ranong** (570km minimum from Bangkok) and **Krabi** (940km plus) and on to **Malaysia** via Trang and Satun (see the travel warning on p.485 concerning other crossings into Malaysia).

For more detailed itineraries and links to other accounts of cycling in Thailand see Biking Southeast Asia with Mr Pumpy at ⓦwww.mrpumpy.net.

Cycling practicalities

Strong, light, quality **mountain bikes** are the most versatile choice. 26-inch wheels are standard throughout Thailand and are strongly recommended; dual-use (combined road and off-road) tyres are best for touring. As regards panniers and **equipment**, the most important thing is to travel light. Carry a few spare spokes, but don't overdo it with too many tools and spares; parts are cheap in Thailand and most problems can be fixed quickly at any bike shop.

Bringing your bike from home is the best option as you are riding a known quantity. **Importing** it by plane should be straightforward, but check with the airlines for details. Asian airlines do not charge extra.

Buying in Thailand is also a possibility; the range is reasonable and prices tend to be cheaper than in the West or Australia. In Bangkok, the best outlet is Probike, next to Lumphini Park at 237/2 Thanon Rajdamri (ⓣ02 253 3384, ⓦwww.probike.co.th). You can also **rent** Trek 4500 mountain bikes through the Bangkok cycle-tour operator Spice Roads (ⓣ02 712 5305, ⓦwww.spiceroads.com), from US$7/day.

Hitching

Public transport being so inexpensive, you should only have to resort to **hitching** in the most remote areas, in which case you'll probably get a lift to the nearest bus or songthaew stop quite quickly. On routes served by buses and trains, hitching is not standard practice, but in other places locals do rely on regular passers-by (such as national park officials), and as a farang you can make use of this "service" too. As with hitching anywhere in the world, think twice about hitching solo or at night, especially if you're female. Like bus drivers, truck drivers are notorious users of amphetamines, so you may want to wait for a safer offer.

Accommodation

Cheap accommodation can be found all over Thailand. For the simplest double room, prices generally start at around B150 in the outlying regions, B200 in Bangkok, and B350 in some of the pricier resorts. Tourist centres invariably offer a huge range of more upmarket choices, and you'll have little problem finding luxury hotels in these places. In most resort areas rates fluctuate according to demand, plummeting during the off-season and, in some places, rising at weekends throughout the year.

Accommodation prices

Throughout this guide, guesthouses, hotels and bungalows have been categorized according to the **price codes** given below. These categories represent the **minimum** you can expect to pay in the **high season** (roughly July, Aug and Nov–Feb) for a **double room**; note, though, that there may be an extra "peak" supplement for the Christmas–New Year period. If travelling on your own, expect to pay anything between sixty and one hundred percent of the rates quoted for a double room. Wherever a price range is indicated, this means that the establishment offers rooms with varying facilities – as explained in the write-up. Where an establishment also offers **dormitory beds**, the price per bed is given in the text, instead of being indicated by a price code. Top-whack hotels will add **seven percent tax** and **ten percent service charge** to your bill – the price codes below are based on net rates after taxes have been added.

① Under B200
② B200–350
③ B350–500
④ B500–700
⑤ B700–1000
⑥ B1000–1500
⑦ B1500–2500
⑧ B2500–4000
⑨ Over B4000

Guesthouses, bungalows and hostels

Guesthouses and **bungalows** are small budget hotels aimed specifically at Western travellers and designed to offer cheap accommodation plus a range of other traveller-oriented facilities, usually including an inexpensive restaurant, a safety deposit system for valuables and luggage storage, and perhaps extending to Internet access, a tour operator desk, and a poste restante service. The difference between guesthouses and bungalows is often academic, though "bungalows", which are generally found on the beach, do often comprise rooms in huts, villas, chalets or indeed bungalows, while the term "guesthouse" is more common in urban areas and villages where rooms are likely to be in a purpose-built hotel-style building or a converted home. En-suite showers and flush toilets are common, but at the cheaper places you might be showering with a bowl dipped into a large water jar, and using squat toilets.

Both guesthouses and bungalows are increasingly offering a spread of options to cater for all budgets: their **cheapest rooms** will often be furnished with nothing more than a double bed, a blanket and a fan (window optional, private bathroom extra) and might cost anything from B100 to 300 for two people, depending on the location and the competition; Bangkok and the big beach resorts are the least good value. A similar room with **en-suite** bathroom, and possibly more stylish furnishings, generally comes in at B180–500, while for a room with **air-con**, and perhaps a TV and fridge as well, you're looking at B200–800.

In the most popular tourist centres at the busiest times of year, the best-known guest houses are often full night after night. An increasing number will take **bookings** and advance payment via their websites, but for those that don't it's usually a question of turning up and waiting for a vacancy. At most guesthouses **checkout time** is either 11am or noon.

Generally you should avoid taking advice from a **tout** or tuk-tuk driver, as they demand commission from guesthouse owners, which, if not passed directly on to you via a higher room price, can have a crippling effect on the smaller guesthouses. If a tout claims your intended accommodation is "full" or "no good" or has "burnt down", it's always worth phoning to check yourself. However, during the busiest periods at popular resorts, you may find yourself turning to the touts, since at least they'll know a place that has vacant rooms.

With just 27 officially registered **youth hostels** in the whole country, it's not worth becoming a YHA member just for your trip to Thailand, especially as card-holders get only a small discount anyway. In general, youth-hostel prices work out the same as guesthouse rates and rooms are open to all

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514/6 Regent Ratchada, Soi Sahakarnpramoon, Pracha-Uthid Road., Wangthonglang, Wangthonglang, Bangkok 10310
Tel: +66 (0) 2158 2525-9 Fax: +66 (0) 2158 2595
Email: info@krabilaplaya.com URL: www.krabilaplaya.com

ages, whether or not you're a member. They are mostly aimed towards Thai students and so may not be staffed by English-speakers. Online reservations can be made via the Thai Youth Hostels Association website (Ⓦwww.tyha.org).

Budget hotels

Thai sales reps and other people travelling for business rather than pleasure rarely use guest houses, opting instead for **budget hotels**, which offer rooms from B150 to 700. Beds in these places are large enough for a couple, and it's quite acceptable for two people to ask and pay for a "single" room (*hawng thiang diaw*, literally a "one-bedded room"). Usually run by Chinese-Thais, these three- or four-storey places are found in every sizeable town, often near the bus station. Though the rooms are generally clean and en suite, and come with either fan or air-con, the atmosphere in these places is generally less convivial than at guesthouses and there's rarely an on-site restaurant. A number of budget hotels also double as brothels, though as a farang you're unlikely to be offered this sideline, and you might not even notice the goings-on.

Advance reservations are accepted over the phone, but this is rarely necessary, as such hotels rarely fill up. The only time you may have difficulty finding a budget hotel room is during Chinese New Year (a moveable three-day period in late January or February), when many Chinese-run hotels close and others get booked up fast.

Moderate hotels

Moderate hotels – priced between B700 and B1500 – can sometimes work out to be good value, offering many of the trimmings of a top-end hotel (air-con, TV, fridge, pool, restaurant,

Online booking agents

Asia Hotels Ⓦwww.asia-hotels.com
Hotel Thailand Ⓦhotelthailand.com
Passion Asia Ⓦwww.passionasia.com
Sawadee Ⓦwww.sawadee.com
Thai Focus Ⓦwww.thaifocus.com

nightclub), but none of the prestige. They're often the kind of places that once stood at the top of the range, but were downgraded when the multinational luxury hotels muscled in and hogged the poshest clientele. Bed size varies more than in the budget hotels, with some making the strict Western distinction between singles and doubles. You're unlikely to have trouble finding a room on spec, though advance reservations are accepted by phone and booking online through one of the accommodation finders listed on below can sometimes save you quite a lot of money.

Upmarket and boutique hotels

Many of Thailand's **upmarket hotels** belong to international chains like Holiday Inn, Marriott and Sheraton, and home-grown chains such as Amari and Dusit, maintaining top-quality standards in Bangkok and major resorts at prices of B2500 (£40/US$60) and upward for a double – far less than you'd pay for equivalent accommodation in the West.

Thailand also boasts an increasing number of exceptionally stylish **super-deluxe hotels**, many of them designed as intimate, small-scale **boutique** hotels, with chic minimalist decor and excellent facilities that often include a **spa** (see p.63 for more on spas). A night in one of these places will rarely cost you less than B4000 (£100/US$150) – and may set you back more than twice as much; see accommodation listings for Bangkok, Hua Hin, Ko Samui and Phuket for some suggestions. A note of caution about the term "boutique", however: as in the West, accommodation owners have latched onto it for marketing purposes – sometimes, in practice, a "boutique" guesthouse or hotel is little more than "small".

Many luxury hotels quote rates in US dollars, though you can always pay in baht. It's a good idea to **reserve ahead** in Bangkok, Phuket, Ko Samui, Ko Phi Phi or Pattaya during peak season. And consider checking online accommodation-booking services (listed on below) as many of these offer big discounts on top hotels.

Homestays

As guesthouses have become increasingly hotel-like and commercial in their facilities and approach, many tourists looking for old-style local hospitality are choosing **homestay accommodation** instead. Homestay facilities are nearly always simple, and cheap at around B100–150 per person per night, with guests staying in a spare room and eating with the family. Homestays give an unparalleled insight into typical Thai (usually rural) life and can often be incorporated into a programme that includes experiencing village activities such as rice-farming, squid-fishing, rubber-tapping or silk-weaving. They are also a positive way of supporting small communities, as all your money will feed right back into the village. As well as listed homestays in Pha To (see p.290), Khuraburi (see p.368), Ko Yao Noi (see p.423) and Krabi (see p.434), there are many others bookable either through REST (Responsible Ecological Social Tours; Ⓦwww.rest.or.th) or as part of a holiday organized via Telltale Travel (Ⓦwww.telltaletravel.co.uk).

National parks

Nearly all the **national parks** have accommodation facilities, usually comprising a series of simple concrete bungalows that cost an average B800 for two or more beds plus a basic bathroom. Because most of their custom comes from Thai families and student groups, park officials are sometimes loath to discount them for lone travellers, though a few parks do offer dorm-style accommodation at around B100 a bed. In many parks, advance booking is unnecessary except at weekends and holidays.

If you do want to pre-book, the easiest option is to do it online at Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp – though, as credit-card payment is not yet possible, you need to pay in cash or via bank draft within three days of booking, most conveniently at any branch of Krung Thai bank, or at designated international banks, or at the National Park headquarters in question; see the "Reservation" section of individual national park webpages at the site given above for comprehensive details. The alternatives are to pay on the spot in Bangkok at the offices of the National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Department (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm; Ⓣ02 562 0760), located in the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE), near Kasetsart University at 61 Thanon Phaholyothin, about 4km north of the Mo Chit Skytrain terminus and Chatuchak Park subway stop; or to book on the phone (not much English spoken), then pay as above. A few national parks accept phone bookings themselves; these are highlighted in the guide chapters. If you turn up without booking, check in at the park headquarters, which is usually adjacent to the visitor centre.

In a few parks, private operators have set up low-cost guesthouses on the outskirts, and these generally make more attractive and economical places to stay.

Camping

You can usually **camp** in a national park for a nominal fee of B30, and some national parks also rent out fully equipped tents at anything from B100 to B400. Unless you're planning an extensive tour of national parks, though, there's little point in lugging a tent around Thailand: accommodation everywhere else is too inexpensive to make camping a necessity, and anyway there are no campgrounds inside town perimeters.

Camping is allowed on nearly all **islands and beaches**, many of which are national parks in their own right. Few travellers bother to bring tents for beaches, though, opting instead for inexpensive bungalow accommodation or sleeping out under the stars.

Food and drink

Bangkok is the country's main culinary centre, boasting the cream of gourmet Thai restaurants and the best international cuisines. The rest of the country is by no means a gastronomic wasteland, however, and you can eat well and cheaply in even the smallest provincial towns, many of which offer the additional attraction of regional specialities. In fact you could eat more than adequately without ever entering a restaurant, as itinerant food vendors hawking hot and cold snacks materialize in even the most remote spots, as well as on trains and buses – and night markets often serve customers from dusk until dawn.

Hygiene is a consideration when eating anywhere in Thailand, but being too cautious means you'll end up spending a lot of money and missing out on some real local treats. Wean your stomach gently by avoiding excessive amounts of chillies and too much fresh fruit in the first few days, and always drink either bottled or boiled water.

You can be pretty sure that any noodle stall or curry shop that's permanently packed with customers is a safe bet. Furthermore, because most Thai dishes can be cooked in under five minutes, you'll rarely have to contend with stuff that's been left to smoulder and stew. Foods that are generally considered high risk include salads, raw or undercooked meat, fish or eggs, ice and ice cream. If you're really concerned about health standards you could stick to restaurants and food stalls displaying a "**Clean Food Good Taste**" sign, part of a food sanitation project set up by the Ministry of Public Health, TAT and the Ministry of Interior. The criteria for awarding the logo seem to have some rigour: less than half of applicants pass muster, and thirty percent of awardees are randomly chosen and reassessed each year.

For a detailed **food and drink glossary**, turn to p.546.

The glorious range and flavours of **Thai cuisine**, along with the specialities of southern Thailand, are discussed in the colour insert later on in this book. For those interested in **learning Thai cookery**, short courses designed for visitors are held in Bangkok, Ko Samui, Krabi and Phuket; see the relevant accounts for details.

Where to eat

A lot of tourists eschew the huge range of Thai **places to eat**, despite their obvious attractions, and opt instead for the much "safer" restaurants in guesthouses and hotels. Almost all tourist accommodation has a kitchen, and while some are excellent, the vast majority serve up bland imitations of Western fare alongside equally pale versions of common Thai dishes. However, guest houses do serve comfortingly familiar Western breakfasts.

Throughout the country most **inexpensive Thai restaurants** and cafés specialize in one general food type or preparation method, charging around B30 a dish – a "noodle shop", for example, will do fried noodles and/or noodle soups, plus maybe a basic fried rice, but they won't have curries or meat or fish dishes. Similarly, a restaurant displaying whole roast chickens and ducks in its window will offer these sliced, usually with chillies and sauces and served over rice, but their menu probably won't extend to noodles or fish, while in "curry shops" your options are limited to the vats of curries stewing away in the hot cabinet.

To get a wider array of low-cost food, it's sometimes best to head for the local **night market** (*talat yen*), a term for the gatherings of open-air night-time kitchens found in every town. Often operating from 6pm to 6am, they are typically to be found on permanent patches close to the fruit and vegetable market or the bus station, and as often as not they're the best and most entertaining places to eat, not to mention the least expensive – after a lip-smacking feast of savoury dishes, a fruit drink and a dessert you'll come away no more than B100 poorer.

A typical night market has some thirty-odd "specialist" pushcart kitchens (*rot khen*) jumbled together, each fronted by several sets of tables and stools. Noodle and fried-rice vendors always feature prominently, as do sweets stalls, heaped high with sticky rice cakes wrapped in banana leaves or thick with bags of tiny sweetcorn pancakes hot from the griddle – and no night market is complete without its fruit-drink stall, offering banana shakes and freshly squeezed orange, lemon and tomato juices. In the best setups you'll find a lot more besides: curries, barbecued sweetcorn, satay sticks of pork and chicken, deep-fried insects, fresh pineapple, watermelon and mango, and in coastal towns, heaps of fresh fish. Having decided what you want, you order from the cook (or the cook's dogsbody) and sit down at the nearest table; there is no territorialism about night markets, so it's normal to eat several dishes from separate stalls and rely on the nearest cook to sort out the bill.

Some large markets, particularly in Bangkok, have separate **food court** areas where you buy coupons first and select food and drink to their value at the stalls of your choice. This is also the modus operandi in the food courts found on the top floor of department stores and shopping centres across the country.

For a more relaxing ambience, Bangkok and the larger towns have a range of **upmarket restaurants**, some specializing in **"royal" Thai cuisine**, which differs from standard fare mainly in the quality of the ingredients and the way the food is presented. Great care is taken over how individual dishes look: they are served in small portions and decorated with carved fruit and vegetables in a way that used to be the prerogative of royal cooks, but has now filtered down to the common folk. The cost of such delights is not prohibitive, either – a meal in one of these places is unlikely to cost more than B500 per person.

Vegetarians and vegans

Although very few Thais are **vegetarian** (*mangsawirat*), it's usually possible to persuade cooks to rustle up a vegetable-only fried rice or noodle dish, though in more out-of-the-way places that's often your only option unless you eat fish – so you'll need to supplement your diet with the nuts, barbecued sweetcorn, fruit and other non-meaty goodies sold by food stalls. In tourist spots, vegetarians can happily splurge on specially concocted Thai and Western veggie dishes, and some restaurants will come up with a completely separate menu if requested.

Fruits of Thailand

One of the most refreshing snacks in Thailand is **fruit** (*phonlamai*), and you'll find it offered everywhere – neatly sliced in glass boxes on hawker carts, blended into delicious shakes at night market stalls and served as a dessert in restaurants.

The fruits described below can be found in all parts of Thailand, though some are seasonal. The country's more familiar fruits are not listed here, but include forty varieties of **banana** (*kluay*), dozens of different **mangoes** (*mamuang*), three types of **pineapple** (*sapparot*), **coconuts** (*maprao*), **oranges** (*som*), **lemons** (*manao*) and **watermelons** (*taeng moh*).

To avoid stomach trouble, **peel all fruit** before eating it, and use common sense if you're tempted to buy it pre-peeled on the street, avoiding anything that looks fly-blown or seems to have been sitting in the sun for hours.

Custard apple (soursop; *noina*; July–Sept). Inside the knobbly, muddy green skin you'll find creamy, almond-coloured blancmange-like flesh, having a strong flavour of strawberries and pears, with a hint of cinnamon, and many seeds.

Durian (*thurian*; April–June). Thailand's most prized, and expensive, fruit has a greeny-yellow, spiky exterior and grows to the size of a football. Inside, it divides into segments of thick, yellow-white flesh which gives off a disgustingly strong stink that's been compared to a mixture of mature cheese and caramel. Not surprisingly, many airlines and hotels ban the eating of this smelly delicacy on their premises. Most Thais consider it the king of fruits, while most foreigners find it utterly foul in both taste and smell.

Guava (*farang*; year-round). The apple of the tropics has green textured skin and sweet, crisp flesh that can be pink or white and is studded with tiny edible seeds. Has five times the vitamin C content of an orange and is sometimes eaten cut into strips and sprinkled with sugar and chilli.

Jackfruit (*khanun*; year-round). This large, pear-shaped fruit can weigh up to twenty kilograms and has a thick, bobbly, greeny-yellow shell protecting sweet yellow flesh. Green, unripe jackfruit is sometimes cooked as a vegetable in curries.

Lychee (*linjii*; April–May). Under rough, reddish-brown skin, the lychee has sweet, richly flavoured white flesh, rose-scented and with plenty of vitamin C, round a brown, egg-shaped pit.

Longan (*lamyai*; July–Oct). A close relative of the lychee, with succulent white flesh covered in thin, brittle skin.

Mangosteen (*mangkut*; April–Sept). The size of a small apple, with smooth, purple skin and a fleshy inside that divides into succulent white segments that are sweet though slightly acidic.

Papaya (paw-paw; *malakaw*; year-round). Looks like an elongated watermelon, with smooth green skin and yellowy-orange flesh that's a rich source of vitamins A and C. It's a favourite in fruit salads and shakes, and sometimes appears in its green, unripe form in salads, notably *som tam*.

Pomelo (*som oh*; Oct–Dec). The largest of all the citrus fruits, it looks rather like a grapefruit, though it is slightly drier and has less flavour.

Rambutan (*ngaw*; May–Sept). The bright red rambutan's soft, spiny exterior has given it its name – *rambut* means "hair" in Malay. Usually about the size of a golf ball, it has a white, opaque flesh of delicate flavour, similar to a lychee.

Rose apple (*chomphuu*; year-round). Linked in myth with the golden fruit of immortality; small and egg-shaped, with white, rose-scented flesh.

Sapodilla (sapota; *lamut*; Sept–Dec). These small, brown, rough-skinned ovals look a bit like kiwi fruit and conceal a grainy, yellowish pulp that tastes almost honey-sweet.

Tamarind (*makhaam*; Dec–Jan). A Thai favourite and a pricey delicacy – carrying the seeds is said to make you safe from wounding by knives or bullets. Comes in rough, brown pods containing up to ten seeds, each surrounded by a sticky, dry pulp which has a sour, lemony taste.

If you're **vegan** (*jeh*) you'll need to stress when you order that you don't want egg, as they get used a lot; cheese and other dairy produce, however, don't feature at all in Thai cuisine. Many towns will have one or more **vegan restaurants** (*raan ahaan jeh*), which are usually run by members of a temple or Buddhist sect and operate from unadorned premises off the main streets; because strict Buddhists prefer not to eat late in the day, most of the restaurants open early, at around 6 or 7am and close by 2pm. Very few of these places have an English-language sign, but they all display the Thai character for vegan, a "jeh" (a little like the letter "q" with an elongated arching tail that curves over its head to the left), in yellow on a red background. Nor is there ever a menu: customers simply choose from the trays of veggie stir-fries and curries, nearly all of them made with soya products, that are laid out canteen-style. Most places charge around B30 for a couple of helpings served over a plate of brown rice.

How to eat

Thai food is eaten with a **fork** (left hand) and a **spoon** (right hand); there is no need for a knife as food is served in bite-sized chunks, which are forked onto the spoon and fed into the mouth. Steamed **rice** (*khao*) is served with most meals, and indeed the most commonly heard phrase for "to eat" is *kin khao* (literally, "eat rice"). **Chopsticks** are provided only for noodle dishes, and northeastern sticky-rice dishes are always eaten with the **fingers of your right hand**. Never eat with the fingers of your left hand, which is used for washing after going to the toilet.

So that complementary taste combinations can be enjoyed, the dishes in a Thai meal are served all at once, even the soup, and shared communally. The more people, the more taste and texture sensations; if there are only two of you, it's normal to order three dishes, plus your own individual plates of steamed rice, while three diners would order four dishes, and so on. Only put a serving of one dish on your rice plate each time, and then only one or two spoonfuls.

Bland food is anathema to Thais, and restaurant tables everywhere come decked out with a **condiment set** featuring the four basic flavours (salty, sour, sweet and spicy): fish sauce with chopped chillies; vinegar with chopped chillies; sugar; and dried chillies – and often extra bowls of ground peanuts and a bottle of chilli ketchup as well. If you do bite into a **chilli**, the way to combat the searing heat is to take a mouthful of plain rice: swigging water just exacerbates the sensation.

Drinks

Thais don't drink water straight from the tap, and nor should you; plastic bottles of drinking **water** (*nam plao*) are sold countrywide, in even the smallest villages, for around B5–10. Cheap restaurants and hotels generally serve free jugs of boiled water, which should be fine to drink, though they are not as foolproof as the bottles.

Night markets, guesthouses and restaurants do a good line in freshly squeezed **fruit juices** such as lemon (*nam manao*) and orange (*nam som*), which often come with salt and sugar already added, particularly upcountry. The same places will usually do **fruit shakes** as well, blending bananas (*nam kluay*), papayas (*nam malakaw*), pineapples (*nam sapparot*) and others with liquid sugar or condensed milk (or yoghurt, to make lassi). Fresh **coconut water** (*nam maprao*) is another great thirst-quencher – you buy the whole fruit dehusked, decapitated and chilled; Thais are also very partial to freshly squeezed **sugar-cane juice** (*nam awy*), which is sickeningly sweet.

Bottled and canned brand-name **soft drinks** are sold all over the place, with a particularly wide range in the ubiquitous 7–11 chain stores. Soft-drink bottles are returnable, so some shops and drink stalls have an amazing system of pouring the contents into a small plastic bag (fastened with an elastic band and with a straw inserted) rather than charging you the extra for taking away the bottle. The larger restaurants keep their soft drinks refrigerated, but smaller cafés and shops add **ice** (*nam khaeng*) to glasses and bags. Most ice is produced commercially under hygienic conditions, but it might become less pure in transit so be wary – and don't take ice if you have diarrhoea. For those travelling with children, or just partial themselves to **dairy products**, UHTpreserved milk and chilled yoghurt drinks are widely available (especially 7–11 stores), as are a variety of soya drinks.

Weak Chinese **tea** (*nam chaa*) makes a refreshing alternative to water and often gets served in Chinese restaurants and roadside cafés. Posher restaurants keep stronger Chinese and Western-style teas and **coffee** (*kaafae*), which is nowadays mostly the ubiquitous instant Nescafé. This is usually the coffee offered to farangs, even if freshly ground Thai-grown coffee – notably several kinds of hill-tribe coffee from the mountains of the north – is available. If you would like to try traditional Thai coffee, most commonly found at Chinese-style cafés in the south of the country or at outdoor markets, and prepared through filtering the grounds through a cloth, ask for *kaafae thung* (literally, "bag coffee"), normally served very bitter with sugar as well as sweetened condensed milk alongside a glass of black tea to wash it down with. Fresh Western-style coffee (*kaafae sot*), whether filtered, espresso or percolated, is mostly limited to farang-oriented places, international-style coffee bars and big hotels, in Bangkok and the beach areas. Tea and coffee are normally served black, perhaps with a sachet of coffee whitener on the side.

Alcoholic drinks

Beer (*bia*) is one of the few consumer items in Thailand that's not a bargain due to the heavy taxes levied on the beverage – at around B50 for a 330ml bottle in the shops, it works out roughly the same as what you'd pay in the West (larger, 660ml bottles, when available, are always slightly better value). The two most famous local beers are Singha, which now has six percent alcohol content and an improved taste (ask for "*bia sing*"), and the cheaper Chang, which weighs in at a head-banging seven percent alcohol. All manner of foreign beers are now brewed in Thailand, including Heineken and Asahi, and in the most touristy areas you'll find imported bottles from all over the world.

Wine attracts even higher taxation than beer. It's now found on plenty of upmarket and tourist-oriented restaurant menus, but expect to be disappointed both by the quality and by the price. Thai wine is now produced at several vineyards, notably at Château de Loei in the northeast, which produces quite tasty reds, whites, a rosé, a dessert wine and brandy.

At about B75 for a hip-flask-sized 375ml bottle, the local **whisky** is a lot better value, and Thais think nothing of consuming a bottle a night, heavily diluted with ice and soda or Coke. The most palatable and widely available of these is Mekong, which is very pleasant once you've stopped expecting it to taste like Scotch; distilled from rice, Mekong is 35 percent proof, deep gold in colour and tastes slightly sweet. If that's not to your taste, a pricier Thai **rum** is also available, Sang Thip, made from sugar cane, and even stronger than the whisky at forty percent proof. Check the menu carefully when ordering a bottle of Mekong from a bar in a tourist area, as they often ask up to five times more than you'd pay in a guesthouse or shop.

You can **buy** beer and whisky in food stores, guest houses and most restaurants at any time of the day; **bars** aren't really an indigenous feature as Thais rarely drink out without eating, but you'll find a fair number of Western-style drinking holes in Bangkok and larger centres elsewhere in the country, ranging from ultra-hip haunts in the capital to basic, open-to-the-elements "**bar-beers**".

Festivals

Nearly all Thai festivals have some kind of religious aspect. The most theatrical are generally Brahmanic (Hindu) in origin, honouring elemental spirits with ancient rites and ceremonial costumed parades. Buddhist celebrations usually revolve round the local temple, and while merit-making is a significant feature, a light-hearted atmosphere prevails, as the wat grounds are swamped with food and trinket vendors and makeshift stages are set up to show likay folk theatre, singing stars and beauty contests; there may even be funfair rides as well.

Few of the **dates** for religious festivals are fixed, so check with TAT for specifics or consult Ⓦwww.thailandgrandfestival.com. The names of the most touristy celebrations are given here in English; the more low-key festivals are more usually known by their Thai name (*ngan* means "festival").

A festival calendar

January–May

Bangkok International Film Festival (usually takes place over ten days in Feb; Ⓦwww.bangkokfilm.org). An annual chance to preview new and unusual Thai films alongside features and documentaries from around the world.

Nationwide *Maha Puja* (particularly Wat Benjamabophit in Bangkok; Feb full-moon day). A day of merit-making marks the occasion when 1250 disciples gathered spontaneously to hear the Buddha preach, and culminates with a candlelit procession round the local temple's bot.

Nakhon Si Thammarat *Hae Pha Khun That* (for Maha Puja at Feb full moon). Southerners gather to pay homage to the Buddha relics at Wat Mahathat, including a procession of long saffron cloth around the chedi. See p.340.

Phetchaburi *Phra Nakhon Khiri fair* (mid-Feb). *Son-et-lumière* at Khao Wang palace.

Nationwide *Kite fights and flying contests* (particularly Sanam Luang, Bangkok; late Feb to mid-April). There's also an International Kite Festival, held in Cha-am in March.

Nationwide *Songkhran* (particularly Bangkok's Thanon Khao San; usually April 13–15). The most exuberant of the national festivals welcomes the Thai New Year with massive water fights, sandcastle building in temple compounds and the inevitable parades and "Miss Songkhran" beauty contests. See p.17.

Nationwide *Visakha Puja* (particularly Bangkok's Wat Benjamabophit and Nakhon Si Thammarat; May full-moon day). The holiest day of the Buddhist year, commemorating the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha all in one go; the most public and photogenic part is the candlelit evening procession around the wat.

Sanam Luang, Bangkok *Raek Na* (early May). The royal ploughing ceremony to mark the beginning of the rice-planting season; ceremonially clad Brahmin leaders parade sacred oxen and the royal plough, and interpret omens to forecast the year's rice yield.

June–December

Hua Hin *Jazz Festival* (a weekend in late June). Well-known musicians from Thailand and abroad play for free at various special outdoor venues throughout the beach resort.

Hua Hin *Elephant Polo Tournament* (five days in late September). Teams from around the world compete on elephant-back in this variation on the traditional game. Also features an elephant parade and various other elephant-related events.

Nakhon Si Thammarat *Tamboon Deuan Sip* (Sept or Oct). Merit-making ceremonies to honour dead relatives accompanied by a ten-day fair on the town field. See p.340.

Ko Si Chang *King Chulalongkorn's Birthday* (Sept 20). Islanders honour the memory of their patron-king Rama V with a *son et lumière* and a beauty contest staged entirely in nineteenth-century dress. See p.199.

Phuket and Trang *Vegetarian Festival* (*Ngan Kin Jeh*; Oct or Nov). Chinese devotees become vegetarian for a nine-day period and then parade through town performing acts of self-mortification such as pushing skewers through their cheeks. Celebrated in Bangkok's Chinatown by most food vendors and restaurants turning vegetarian for about a fortnight . See pp.164 and 395.

Nationwide *Tak Bat Devo* and *Awk Pansa* (Oct full-moon day). Offerings to monks and general merrymaking to celebrate the Buddha's descent to earth from Tavatimsa heaven and the end of the Khao Pansa retreat.

Surat Thani *Chak Phra* (mid-Oct). The town's chief Buddha images are paraded on floats down the streets and on barges along the river. See p.293.

Nationwide *Thawt Kathin* (the month between Awk Pansa and Loy Krathong, generally Oct to Nov). During the month following the end of the monks' rainy-season retreat, it's traditional for the laity to donate new robes to the monkhood and this is celebrated in most towns with parades and a festival.

Nationwide *Loy Krathong* (full moon in Nov). Baskets (*krathong*) of flowers and lighted candles are floated on any available body of water (such as ponds, rivers, lakes, canals and seashores) to honour water spirits and celebrate the end of the rainy season. Nearly every town puts on a big show, with bazaars, public entertainments and fireworks.

Wat Saket, Bangkok *Ngan Wat Saket* (first week of Nov). Probably Thailand's biggest temple fair, held around the Golden Mount, with all the usual festival trappings.

Nationwide *New Year's Eve Countdown* (Dec 31). Most cities and tourist destinations welcome in the new year with fireworks, often backed up by food festivals, beauty contests and outdoor performances.

Outdoor activities

The vast majority of beach itineraries include a stint snorkelling or diving, and the big resorts of Pattaya, Phuket and Ko Samui also offer dozens of other watersports. There is also a developing interest in more unusual outdoor activities, such as rock-climbing and kayaking. Golf has also taken off in Thailand, and there are dozens of courses across the country, the best of them concentrated near the resort towns of Hua Hin (see p.277) and Pattaya (see p.210). Details of watersports at the major resorts are given in the relevant accounts.

Diving and snorkelling

Clear, warm waters (averaging 28°C), prolific marine life and affordable prices make Thailand a very rewarding place for **diving** and **snorkelling**. Almost every island or beach resort has at least one dive shop that organizes diving and snorkelling trips to outlying islands, trains novice divers and rents out equipment, and in the bigger resorts there are dozens of dive centres to choose from.

Thailand's three coasts are subject to different monsoon **seasons**, so you can dive all year round; the diving seasons run from

Thailand's best dives and dive resorts

The east coast

Pattaya (p.209)

The Andaman coast

Ao Nang (p.447)
Burma Banks (p.409)
Hin Muang and Hin Daeng (p.409)
Ko Lanta (p.468)
Ko Phi Phi (p.454)
Ko Racha (p.409)
Ko Similan (p.385)
Ko Surin (p.371)
Phuket (p.408)

The Gulf coast

Ko Pha Ngan (p.319)
Ko Samui (p.297)
Ko Tao (p.332)

The deep south

Ko Lipe (p.508)

November to April along the Andaman coast (though there is sometimes good diving here up until late August), and all year round on the Gulf and east coasts. Though every diver has their favourite reef, Thailand's premier diving destinations are generally considered to be Ko Similan, Ko Surin, Burma Banks and Hin Muang and Hin Daeng – all of them off the Andaman coast. To many people's surprise, the 2004 tsunami caused relatively little damage to the Andaman coast's top reefs; dive companies simply bypass those sites that were affected. As an accessible base for diving, Ko Tao off the Gulf coast is hard to beat, with deep, clear inshore water and a wide variety of dive sites in very close proximity.

Whether you're snorkelling or diving, you should be aware of your effect on the fragile reef structures. Try to minimize your impact by **not touching the reefs** and asking your boatman not to anchor in the middle of one, and **don't buy coral souvenirs**, as tourist demand only encourages local entrepreneurs to dynamite reefs.

Diving

It's always worth having a look at several **dive centres** before committing yourself to a trip or a course. Always verify the dive instructors' PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) or equivalent accreditation and check to see if the dive shop is a member of PADI's International Resorts and Retailers Association (IRRA) as this guarantees a certain level of professionalism. You can view a list of IRRAs in Thailand at Ⓦwww.padi.com.

We‘ve highlighted IRRA dive shops that are accredited Five-Star centres, as these are considered by PADI to offer very high standards, but you should always check with other divers first if possible, no matter how many stars your chosen dive centre has garnered. Some dive operators do fake their PADI credentials, which is why it's good to get a second opinion. Avoid booking ahead over the Internet without knowing anything else about the dive centre, and be wary of any operation offering extremely cheap courses: maintaining diving equipment is an expensive business in Thailand so any place offering unusually good rates will probably be cutting corners and compromising your safety. Ask to **meet your instructor** or dive leader, find out how many people there'll be in your group, check out the kind of instruction given (some courses are over-reliant on videos) and look over the equipment, checking the quality of the air in the tanks yourself and also ensuring there's an oxygen cylinder on board. Most novice and experienced divers prefer to travel to the dive site in a decent-sized **boat** equipped with a radio and emergency medical equipment rather than in a longtail. If this concerns you, ask the dive company about their boat before you sign up – any company with a good boat will have photos of it to impress potential customers – though you'll find firms that use longtails will probably charge less.

Insurance should be included in the price of courses and introductory dives; for qualified divers, you're better off checking that your general travel insurance covers diving, though some of the more reputable diving operators in Thailand can organize cover for you. There are several **recompression chambers** in Thailand, including two in Sattahip on the east coast near Pattaya and one in Pattaya itself (see p.215), one on Ko Samui (see p.297), one on Ko Tao (see p.332) and three on Phuket (see p.408). It's a good idea to check whether your dive centre is a member of one of these outfits, as recompression services are extremely expensive for anyone who's not.

For books on diving in Thailand see p.536.

Trips and courses

All dive centres run programmes of one-day **dive trips** (featuring two dives), **wreck dives** and **night dives** for B1300–4500 plus equipment, and many of the Andaman coast dive centres (Khao Lak, Phuket, Ko Phi Phi, Ao Nang) also do three- to seven-day **live-aboards** to the exceptional reefs off the remote Similan and Surin islands (from B11,000) and even further afield to the impressive Burma Banks.

Renting a full set of diving **gear**, including wetsuit, from a dive centre costs B300–1000 per day; most dive centres also rent **underwater cameras** for B1000–1500 per day.

Phuket, Khao Lak, Ao Nang, Ko Phi Phi, Ko Lanta, Ko Tao and Pattaya are the best places to **learn**, and dive centres at all these places offer a range of **courses** from beginner to advanced level, with equipment rental usually included in the cost; Ko Tao is now the largest dive-training centre in Southeast Asia, with around fifty dive companies including plenty of PADI Five-Star centres. The most popular courses are the one-day **introductory** or resort dive (a pep talk and escorted shallow dive), which costs anything from B2000 for a very local dive to B5000 for an all-inclusive day-trip to the fabulous Similan Islands; and the four-day **open-water course** which entitles you to dive without an instructor (B8000–13,500 including at least two dives a day). Kids' Bubblemaker courses, for children aged 8–10, cost around B1500.

Snorkelling

Most beaches offer organized **snorkelling** trips to nearby reefs and many dive operators welcome snorkellers to tag along with the divers for discounts of thirty percent or more; not all diving destinations are rewarding for snorkellers though, so check the relevant account in this book first. As far as snorkelling **equipment** goes, the most important thing is that you buy or rent a mask that fits. To check the fit, hold the mask against your face, then breathe in and remove your hands – if it falls off, it'll leak water. If you're buying equipment, you should be able to kit yourself out with a mask, snorkel and fins for about B1000, available from most dive centres. Few places rent fins, but a mask and snorkel set usually costs about B100 a day to rent, and if you're going on a snorkelling day-trip they are often included in the price.

National parks

Over the last half-century more than a hundred areas across Thailand have been singled out for conservation as **national parks**, with the dual aim of protecting the country's natural resources and creating educational and recreational facilities for the public. These parks generally make the best places to **observe wildlife**. Bird-watchers consider the coastal flats at **Khao Sam Roi Yot** (see p.282) and the sanctuary of **Thale Noi** (see p.489) primary observation spots.

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Many of southern Thailand's protected reserves are **marine parks**, including the archipelagoes of **Ko Similan** (see p.385), **Ko Surin** (see p.370), **Ang Thong** (see p.300) and **Ko Tarutao** (see p.504).

All the national parks are administered by the National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Department, part of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE), which is located near Kasetsart University at 61 Thanon Phaholyothin, Chatuchak District, Bangkok 10900 (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm; ⓣ02 562 0760, ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp); easiest access is by Skytrain to Mo Chit or subway to Chatuchak Park, then take a bus or taxi about 4km up Phaholyothin to the office, which is north of the Thanon Ngam Wong Wan junction. To book national park bungalows in advance (advisable for weekends and public holidays) you usually need to pay up front; see "Accommodation" on p.50 for details.

For all their environmental benefits, national parks are a source of **controversy** in Thailand, with vested interests such as fishermen, farmers, loggers, poachers and the tourist industry pitted against environmentalists and certain sections of the government. The parks administration has itself come in for voluble criticism over the last few years, particularly over the filming of *The Beach* on the national park island of Ko Phi Phi Leh, and in 2000 when – without warning – it raised the **foreigners' entrance fee** levied at most national parks from B20 to B200 (B100 for children). See "The Coastal Environment" on p.529 for a fuller account of these issues and for a more detailed introduction to Thailand's wildlife.

Most parks have limited public facilities, very few signposted walking trails and a paucity of usable maps. Nor are many of the parks well served by public transport – some can take a day to reach from the nearest large town, via a route that entails several bus and songthaew changes and a final lengthy walk. This, combined with the expense and poor quality of most national park accommodation, means that if you're planning to do a serious tour of the parks you should consider **bringing a tent** (all parks allow this; see p.50 for details) and be prepared to rent your own transport.

Rock-climbing

The limestone karsts that pepper southern Thailand's Andaman coast make ideal playgrounds for **rock-climbers**, and the sport has really taken off here in the last decade. Most climbing is centred round **East Railay** and **Ton Sai** beaches on Laem Phra Nang in Krabi province (see p.330), where there are dozens of routes within easy walking distance of tourist bungalows, restaurants and beaches. Several **climbing schools** have already established centres here, providing instruction, guides and all the necessary equipment. Half-day introductory courses at East Railay and Ton Sai cost B800, a full day's guided climbing is B1500 and a three-day course B5000. **Equipment rental** is charged at about B1000 per day for two people. Ko Phi Phi (see p.455) also offers a few interesting routes and a couple of climbing schools, as does Ko Yao Noi (see p.420). There are also less developed climbing areas on Ko Tao (see p.440) and near Phetchaburi. For an introduction to climbing in Thailand, plus advice on where to climb and what equipment to bring, as well as reviews of climb shops and a climbers' forum, see Ⓦwww.simonfoley.com/climbing.

Sea-kayaking

Sea-kayaking is also centred around Thailand's Andaman coast, where the limestone outcrops, sea caves, *hongs* (hidden lagoons), mangrove swamps and picturesque shorelines of Ao Phang Nga in particular (see colour insert) make for rewarding paddling. Kayaking day-trips around Ao Phang Nga can be arranged from any resort in Phuket, at Khao Lak, at all Krabi beaches and islands, and on Ko Yao Noi; three-to-six-day kayaking expeditions are also possible. The longest-established sea-kayaking operator in this area is the famous and highly reputable John Gray's Sea Canoe (Ⓦwww.johngray-seacanoe.com), whose trips cost from B3000. Paddle Asia (Ⓦwww.paddleasia.com) offer 4–6-day sea-kayaking trips around the Trang islands and the Tarutao National Marine Park islands (from US$675 per person) and over on Ko Samui, Blue Stars (see p.301) organize kayaking trips around the picturesque islands of the Ang Thong National Marine Park. Many other beach resorts rent kayaks for low-key, independent coastal exploration; prices average B100–200 per hour for a one- or two-person kayak.

Entertainment and sport

Most travellers confine their experience of Thai traditional culture to a one-off attendance at a Bangkok tourist show, not least because it can be hard to locate, let alone understand, more authentic folk theatre and music performances. Traditional sport is more accessible however, and just as much of a performance, especially in the case of Thai boxing.

Bangkok has a few authentic fixed venues for dance and a couple for Thai boxing; otherwise it's a question of keeping your eyes open for signs that a travelling troupe may soon turn up. This is most likely at festivals and fairs, which sometimes also feature some of the more traditional pastimes such as (illegal) gambling on the outcome of cock fights and fighting fish contests.

Drama and dance

Drama pretty much equals **dance** in classical Thai theatre, and many of the traditional dance-dramas are based on the Hindu epic the *Ramayana* (in Thai, *Ramakien*), an adventure tale of good versus evil which is taught in all the schools. Not understanding the plots can be a major disadvantage, so check out the wonderfully imaginative murals at Wat Phra Kaeo in Bangkok, after which you'll certainly be able to sort the goodies from the baddies, if little else. There are three broad categories of traditional Thai dance-drama – *khon*, *lakhon* and *likay* – described below in descending order of refinement.

Khon

The most spectacular form of traditional Thai theatre is **khon**, a stylized drama performed in masks and elaborate costumes by a troupe of highly trained classical dancers. There's little room for individual interpretation in these dances, as all the movements follow a strict choreography that's been passed down through generations: each graceful, angular gesture depicts a precise event, action or emotion which will be familiar to educated *khon* audiences. The dancers don't speak, and the story is chanted and sung by a chorus who stand at the side of the stage, accompanied by a classical *phipat* orchestra.

A typical *khon* performance features several of the best-known **Ramayana** episodes, in which the main characters are recognized by their masks, headdresses and heavily brocaded costumes. Gods and humans don't wear masks, but it's generally easy enough to distinguish the hero Rama and heroine Sita from the action; they always wear tall gilded headdresses and often appear in a threesome with Rama's brother Lakshaman. Monkey **masks** are always open-mouthed, almost laughing, and come in several colours: monkey army chief Hanuman always wears white, and his two right-hand men – Nilanol, the god of fire, and Nilapat, the god of death – wear red and black respectively. In contrast, the demons have grim mouths, clamped shut or snarling out of usually green faces; Totsagan, king of the demons, wears a green face in battle and a gold one during peace, but always sports a two-tier headdress carved with two rows of faces.

Khon is performed at Bangkok's National Theatre and is also featured within the various cultural **shows** staged by tourist restaurants in Bangkok, Phuket and Pattaya. Even if you don't see a show, you're bound to come across copies of the masks worn by the main *khon* characters, which are sold as souvenirs all over the country and constitute an art form in their own right.

Lakhon

Serious and refined, **lakhon** is derived from *khon* but is used to dramatize a greater range of stories, including Buddhist Jataka tales, local folk dramas and of course the

Ramayana. The form you're most likely to come across is *lakhon chatri*, which is performed at shrines like Bangkok's Erawan and *lak muang* as entertainment for the spirits and a token of gratitude from worshippers. Usually female, the *lakhon chatri* dancers perform as a group rather than as individual characters, executing sequences which, like *khon* movements, all have minute and particular symbolism. They wear similarly decorative costumes but no masks, and dance to the music of a *phipat* orchestra.

Unfortunately, as resident shrine troupes tend to repeat the same dances a dozen times a day, it's rarely the sublime display it's cracked up to be. Bangkok's National Theatre stages fairly regular performances of the more elegantly executed *lakhon nai*, a dance form that used to be performed at the Thai court and often retells the Ramayana.

Likay

Likay is a much more popular derivative of *khon* – more light-hearted, with lots of comic interludes, bawdy jokes and over-the-top acting and singing. Some *likay* troupes perform *Ramayana* excerpts, but a lot of them adapt pot-boiler romances or write their own. Depending on the show, costumes are either traditional as in *khon* and *lakhon*, modern and Western as in films, or a mixture of both. Likay troupes travel around the country doing shows on makeshift outdoor stages wherever they think they'll get an audience; temples sometimes hire them out for fairs and there's usually a *likay* stage of some kind at a festival.

Performances are often free and generally last for about five hours, with the audience strolling in and out of the show, cheering and joking with the cast throughout. Televised *likay* dramas get huge audiences and always follow romantic plot-lines. Short *likay* dramas are also performed regularly at Bangkok's National Theatre.

Nang

Nang, or shadow plays, are said to have been the earliest dramas performed in Thailand, but now are rarely seen except in the far south, where the Malaysian influence ensures an appreciative audience for *nang thalung*. Crafted from buffalo hide, the two-dimensional *nang thalung* puppets play out scenes from popular dramas against a backlit screen, while the storyline is told through songs, chants and musical interludes. An even rarer *nang* form is the *nang yai*, which uses enormous cut-outs of whole scenes rather than just individual characters, so the play becomes something like an animated film. For more on shadow puppets and puppetry, see p.344.

Film and video

All sizeable towns have a **cinema** or two (Bangkok has over forty) and tickets generally start at B80. In some rural areas, villagers still have to make do with the travelling cinema, or *nang klarng plaeng*, which sets up a mobile screen in wat compounds or other public spaces, and often entertains the whole village in one sitting. However makeshift the cinema, the **king's anthem** is always played before every screening, during which the audience is expected to stand up.

Fast-paced Chinese blockbusters have long dominated the programmes at Thai cinemas, serving up a low-grade cocktail of sex, spooks, violence and comedy. Not understanding the dialogue is rarely a drawback, as the storylines tend to be simple and the visuals more entertaining than the words. In the cities, **Western films** are also pretty big, and new releases often get **subtitled** rather than dubbed.

In recent years Thailand's own film industry has been enjoying a bit of a boom, and in the larger cities and resorts you may be lucky enough to come across one of the bigger Thai hits showing with English subtitles.

The website Ⓦwww.movieseer.com lists the weekly schedule for many cinemas around the country.

Thai boxing

Thai boxing (*muay thai*) enjoys a following similar to soccer or baseball in the West: every province has a stadium and whenever the sport is shown on TV you can be sure that large noisy crowds will gather round the sets in streetside restaurants and noodle shops. The best place to see Thai boxing is at one of Bangkok's two main stadia, which between them hold bouts every night of the week and on some afternoons as well (see p.177).

There's a strong spiritual and **ritualistic** dimension to *muay thai*, adding grace to an otherwise brutal sport. Each boxer enters the ring to the wailing music of a three-piece *phipat* orchestra, often flamboyantly attired in a lurid silk robe over the statutory red or blue boxer shorts. The fighter then bows, first in the direction of his birthplace and then to the north, south, east and west, honouring both his teachers and the spirit of the ring. Next he performs a slow dance, claiming the audience's attention and demonstrating his prowess as a performer.

Any part of the body except the head may be used as an **offensive weapon** in *muay thai*, and all parts except the groin are fair targets. Kicks to the head are the blows which cause most knockouts. As the action hots up, so the orchestra speeds up its tempo and the betting in the audience becomes more frenetic. It can be a gruesome business, but it was far bloodier before modern boxing gloves were made compulsory in the 1930s – combatants used to wrap their fists with hemp impregnated with a face-lacerating dosage of ground glass.

A number of *muay thai* gyms and camps offer training **courses** for foreigners, including the Muay Thai Institute in Bangkok (ⓣ02 992 0096, ⓦwww.muaythai-institute.net); Fairtex Muay Thai (ⓦwww.fairtexbkk.com), which has centres in Samut Prakan, near Bangkok (ⓣ02 755 3329) and in Pattaya (ⓣ038 488675); the Muay Thai Martial Arts Academy (MTMAA) in Surat Thani (ⓣ077 282816, ⓦwww.muaythaitraining.com); and Suwit Gym on Phuket (ⓣ076 381167, ⓦwww.bestmuaythai.com). You can also do one-off training sessions at a couple of gyms in central Bangkok; see p.177 for details.

Takraw

Whether in Bangkok or by the sea, you're quite likely to come across some form of **takraw** game being played in a public park, a wat compound or just in a backstreet alley. Played with a very light rattan ball (or one made of plastic to look like rattan), the basic aim of the game is to keep the ball off the ground. To do this you can use any part of your body except your hands, so a well-played *takraw* game looks extremely balletic, with players leaping and arching to get a good strike.

There are at least five versions of **competitive takraw**, based on the same principles. The version featured in the Southeast Asian Games and most frequently in school tournaments is played over a volleyball net and involves two teams of three; the other most popular competitive version has a team ranged round a basketball net trying to score as many goals as possible within a limited time period before the next team replaces them and tries to outscore them.

Other *takraw* games introduce more complex rules (like kicking the ball backwards with your heels through a ring made with your arms behind your back) and many assign points according to the skill displayed by individual players rather than per goal or dropped ball. Outside of school playing fields, proper *takraw* tournaments are rare, though they do sometimes feature as entertainment at Buddhist funerals.

Spas and traditional massage

The last few years have seen an explosion in the number of spas being opened around Thailand – mainly in the grounds of the poshest hotels, but also as small, affordable walk-in centres in towns. With their focus on indulgent self-pampering, spas are usually associated with high-spending tourists, but the treatments on offer at Thailand's five-star hotels are often little different from those used by traditional medical practitioners, who have long held that massage and herbs are the best way to restore physical and mental well-being.

Thai massage (*nuad paen boran*; see also p.8) is based on the principle that many physical and emotional problems are caused by the blocking of vital energy channels within the body. The masseur uses his or her feet, heels, knees and elbows, as well as hands, to exert a gentle pressure on these channels, supplementing this acupressure-style technique by pulling and pushing the limbs into yogic stretches. This distinguishes Thai massage from most other massage styles, which are more concerned with tissue manipulation.

Nearly every hotel and guesthouse will be able to put you in touch with a masseur, and on the more popular beaches, it can be hard to walk a few hundred metres without being offered a massage – something Thai tourists are just as enthusiastic about as foreigners. Thai masseurs do not use oils or lotions and the client is treated on a mat or mattress; you'll often be given a pair of loose-fitting trousers and perhaps a loose top to change into. English-speaking masseurs will often ask if you have any problem areas on your body that you want them to avoid; if your masseur doesn't speak English, the simplest way to signal this is to point at the offending area while saying *mai sabai* ("not well"); if you're in pain during a massage, wincing usually does the trick, perhaps adding *jep* ("it hurts"). A session should ideally last two hours and will cost around B200–300.

The **science** behind Thai massage has its roots in Indian Ayurvedic medicine, which classifies each component of the body according to one of the four elements (earth, water, fire and air), and holds that balancing these elements within the body is crucial to good health. Many of the stretches and manipulations fundamental to Thai massage are thought to have derived from yogic practices introduced to Thailand from India by Buddhist missionaries in about the second century BC; Chinese acupuncture and reflexology have also had a strong influence. In the nineteenth century, King Rama III ordered a series of murals illustrating the principles of Thai massage to be painted around the courtyard of Bangkok's Wat Pho, and they are still in place today, along with statues of ascetics depicted in typical massage poses. **Wat Pho** has been the leading school of Thai massage for hundreds of years, and it is possible to take courses there as well as to receive a massage; see p.132 for details. Masseurs who trained at Wat Pho are considered to be the best in the country and masseurs all across Thailand advertise this as a credential, whether or not it is true. Many Thais consider blind masseurs to be especially sensitive practitioners. While Wat Pho is the most famous place to take a **course** in Thai massage, you will find others at southern beach resorts.

All **spas** in Thailand feature traditional Thai massage and herbal therapies in their programmes, but most also offer dozens of other international treatments, including facials, aromatherapy, Swedish massage and various body wraps. Spa centres in upmarket hotels and resorts are usually open to non-guests but generally need to be booked in advance; day spas that are not attached to hotels are found in some of the bigger cities and resorts, including Bangkok, Ko Samui and Phuket, and some of these may not require reservations.

Thailand's most famous deluxe spas include the very exclusive Chiva Som holistic therapy centre in Hua Hin (see p.276); the Oriental Spa, run by the renowned five-star *Oriental Hotel* in Bangkok (see p.190); the Banyan Tree spas at the hotels of the same name in Bangkok (see p.190) and Phuket (see p.400); the Six Senses spas at the *Evason* in Pak Nam Pran (see p.281) and the *Sila Evason* on Ko Samui (see p.308); and the Prana Spa at the *Tongsai Bay* on Samui (see p.308).

Meditation centres and retreats

Of the hundreds of meditation temples in Thailand, a few cater specifically for foreigners by holding meditation sessions and retreats in English; novices and practised meditators alike are generally welcome. The meditation taught is mostly Vipassana, or "insight", which emphasizes the minute observation of internal sensations; the other main technique you'll come across is Samatha, which aims to calm the mind and develop concentration (these two techniques are not entirely separate, since you cannot have insight without some degree of concentration).

Longer **retreats** are for the serious-minded only. All the temples listed below welcome both male and female English-speakers, but strict segregation of the sexes is enforced and many places observe a vow of silence. Reading and writing are also discouraged, and you'll generally not be allowed to leave the retreat complex unless absolutely necessary, so try to bring whatever you'll need in with you. Some retreats require you to wear modest, white clothing – check ahead whether there is a shop at the retreat complex or whether you are expected to bring this with you.

An average day at any one of these monasteries starts with a **wake-up call** at 4am and includes several hours of **group meditation** and chanting, as well as time put aside for chores and personal reflection. However long their stay, visitors are usually expected to keep the eight Buddhist precepts, the most restrictive of these being the abstention from food after midday and from alcohol, tobacco, drugs and sex at all times. Most wats ask for a minimal daily **donation** (around B150) to cover the costs of the simple accommodation and food.

Further details about many of the temples listed below – including how to get there – are given in the relevant sections in the guide chapters. Though a little out of date, *A Guide to Buddhist Monasteries and Meditation Centres in Thailand* contains plenty of useful general information; originally published by the World Fellowship of Buddhists, it's now accessible online at Ⓦwww.dharmanet.org/thai_94.html. An even more useful Internet resource is Ⓦwww.dhammathai.org, which provides lots of general background, practical advice and details of meditation temples and centres around Thailand.

Meditation centres and retreat temples

For information on **Wat Khao Tham** on Ko Pha Ngan, see p.320; **Wat Mahathat** in Bangkok, p.133; and **Wat Suan Mokkh** in Chaiya, p.292.

House of Dhamma Insight Meditation Centre 26/9 Soi Lardprao 15, Chatuchak, Bangkok Ⓣ02 511 0439, Ⓦwww.houseofdhamma.com. Vipassana meditation classes in English on the second and third Sunday of the month, plus regular introductory two-day courses, and day, weekend and week-long retreats. Courses in reiki and other subjects available.

International Meditation Club 138 Soi 53, Thanon Sukhumvit, Bangkok Ⓣ081 622 4507, Ⓦwww.intlmedclub.org. Regular, two-day, meditation workshops in Bangkok and three-day retreats in Pattaya and Cha-am.

World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) 616 Benjasiri Park, Soi Medhinivet off Soi 24, Thanon Sukhumvit, Bangkok Ⓣ02 661 1284–7, Ⓦwww.wfb-hq.org. The main information centre for advice on English-speaking retreats in Thailand. Holds a Buddhist discussion group and meditation session in English on the first Sunday of every month, with dharma lectures and discussions on the second Sunday.

Culture, etiquette and the law

Tourist literature has marketed Thailand as the “Land of Smiles” so successfully that a lot of farangs arrive in the country expecting to be forgiven any outrageous behaviour. This is just not the case: there are some things so universally sacred in Thailand that even a hint of disrespect will cause deep offence. TAT publishes a special leaflet on the subject, entitled *Dos and Don’ts in Thailand*, reproduced at ⓦwww.tourismthailand.org.

The monarchy

It is both socially unacceptable and a criminal offence to make critical or defamatory remarks about the **royal family**. Thailand’s monarchy might be a constitutional one, but almost every household displays a picture of King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit in a prominent position, and respectful crowds mass whenever either of them makes a public appearance. The second of their four children, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, is the heir to the throne; his younger sister, Princess Royal Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, is often on TV and in the English newspapers as she is involved in many charitable projects. When addressing or speaking about royalty, Thais use a special language full of deference, called *rajasap* (literally “royal language”).

Aside from keeping any anti-monarchy sentiments to yourself, you should be prepared to stand when the **king’s anthem** is played at the beginning of every cinema programme, and to stop in your tracks if the town you’re in plays the **national anthem** over its public address system – many small towns do this twice a day at 8am and again at 6pm, as do some train stations and airports. A less obvious point: as the king’s head features on all Thai currency, you should never step on a coin or banknote, which is tantamount to kicking the king in the face.

Religion

Almost equally insensitive would be to disregard certain **religious** precepts. **Buddhism** plays an essential part in the lives of most Thais, and Buddhist monuments should be treated with respect – which basically means wearing long trousers or knee-length skirts, covering your arms and removing your shoes whenever you visit one.

All **Buddha images** are sacred, however small, tacky or ruined, and should never be used as a backdrop for a portrait photo, clambered over, placed in a position of inferiority or treated in any manner that could be construed as disrespectful. In an attempt to prevent foreigners from committing any kind of transgression, the government requires a special licence for all Buddha statues exported from the country (see p.76).

Monks come only just beneath the monarchy in the social hierarchy, and they too are addressed and discussed in a special language. If there’s a monk around, he’ll always get a seat on the bus, usually right at the back. Theoretically, monks are forbidden to have any close contact with women, which means, as a female, you mustn’t sit or stand next to a monk, or even brush against his robes; if it’s essential to pass him something, put the object down so that he can then pick it up – never hand it over directly. Nuns, however, get treated like ordinary women.

See Contexts p.523 for more on religious practices in Thailand.

The body

The Western liberalism embraced by the Thai sex industry is very unrepresentative of the majority Thai attitude to the body. **Clothing** – or the lack of it – is what bothers Thais most about tourist behaviour. As mentioned above, you need to dress modestly when entering temples, but the same also applies to other important buildings and all public places. Stuffy and sweaty as it sounds, you should keep short shorts and vests for the real tourist resorts, and be especially diligent about covering up and, for women, wearing bras in rural areas. Baring your flesh on beaches is very much a Western practice: when Thais go swimming they often do so fully clothed, and they find topless and nude bathing extremely unpalatable.

According to ancient Hindu belief, the **head** is the most sacred part of the body and the **feet** are the most unclean. This belief, imported into Thailand, means that it's very rude to touch another person's head or to point your feet either at a human being or at a sacred image – when sitting on a temple floor, for example, you should **tuck your legs beneath you** rather than stretch them out towards the Buddha. These hierarchies also forbid people from wearing **shoes** (which are even more unclean than feet) inside temples and most private homes, and – by extension – Thais take offence when they see someone sitting on the "head", or prow, of a boat. **Putting your feet up** on a table, a chair or a pillow is also considered very uncouth, and Thais will always take their shoes off if they need to stand on a train or bus seat to get to the luggage rack, for example. On a more practical note, the **left hand** is used for washing after defecating, so Thais never use it to put food in their mouth, pass things or shake hands – as a farang though, you'll be assumed to have different customs, so left-handers shouldn't worry unduly.

Social conventions

Thais very rarely shake hands, instead using the **wai** to greet and say goodbye and to acknowledge respect, gratitude or apology. A prayer-like gesture made with raised hands, the *wai* changes according to the relative status of the two people involved: Thais can instantaneously assess which *wai* to use, but as a farang your safest bet is to go for the "stranger's" *wai*, which requires that your hands be raised close to your chest and your fingertips placed just below your chin. If someone makes a *wai* at you, you should generally *wai* back, but it's safer not to initiate.

Public displays of **physical affection** in Thailand are more common between friends of the same sex than between lovers, whether hetero- or homosexual. Holding hands and hugging is as common among male friends as with females, so if you're caressed by a Thai acquaintance of the same sex, don't assume you're being propositioned.

Finally, there are three specifically Thai **concepts** you're bound to come across, which may help you comprehend a sometimes laissez-faire attitude to delayed buses and other inconveniences. The first, **jai yen**, translates literally as "cool heart" and is something everyone tries to maintain – most Thais hate raised voices, visible irritation and confrontations of any kind, so losing one's cool can have a much more inflammatory effect than in more combative cultures. Related to this is the oft-quoted response to a difficulty, **mai pen rai** – "never mind", "no problem" or "it can't be helped" – the verbal equivalent of an open-handed shoulder shrug, which has its basis in the Buddhist notion of karma (see "Religion", p.526). And then there's **sanuk**, the wide-reaching philosophy of "fun", which, crass as it sounds, Thais do their best to inject into any situation, even work. Hence the crowds of inebriated Thais who congregate at waterfalls and other beauty spots on public holidays (travelling solo is definitely not *sanuk*), the inability to do almost anything without high-volume musical accompaniment, and the national water fight which takes place every April on streets right across Thailand.

Thai names

Although all Thais have a first **name** and a family name, everyone is addressed by their first name – even when meeting strangers – prefixed by the title "**Khun**" (Mr/Ms); no one is ever addressed as Khun Surname, and even the phone book lists people by their given name. In Thailand you will often be addressed in an Anglicized version of this convention, as "Mr Paul" or "Miss Lucy" for example. Bear in mind though, that when a man is introduced to you as Khun Pirom, his wife will definitely not be Khun Pirom as well (that would be like calling them, for instance, "Mr and Mrs Paul"). Among friends and relatives, **Phii** ("older brother/sister") is often used instead of Khun when addressing older familiars (though as a tourist you're on surer ground with Khun), and **Nong** ("younger brother/ sister") is used for younger ones.

Many Thai **first names** come from ancient Sanskrit and have an auspicious meaning; for example, Boon means good deeds, Porn means blessings, Siri means glory and Thawee means to increase. However, Thais of all ages are commonly known by the **nickname** given them soon after birth rather than by their official first name. This tradition arises out of a deep-rooted superstition that once a child has been officially named the spirits will begin to take an unhealthy interest in them, so a nickname is used instead to confuse the spirits. Common nicknames – which often bear no resemblance to the adult's personality or physique – include Yai (Big), Oun (Fat) and Muu (Pig); Lek or Noi (Little), Nok (Bird), Noo (Mouse) and Kung (Shrimp); Neung (Number One/Eldest), Sawng (Number Two), Saam (Number Three); and English nicknames like Apple, Joy or even Pepsi.

Family names were only introduced in 1913 (by Rama VI, who invented many of the aristocracy's surnames himself), and are used only in very formal situations, always in conjunction with the first name. It's quite usual for good friends never to know each other's surname. Ethnic Thais generally have short surnames like Somboon or Srisai, while the long, convoluted family names – such as Sonthanasumpun – usually indicate Chinese origin, not because they are phonetically Chinese but because many Chinese immigrants have chosen to adopt new Thai surnames and Thai law states that every newly created surname must be unique. Thus anyone who wants to change their surname must submit a shortlist of five unique Thai names – each to a maximum length of ten Thai characters – to be checked against a database of existing names. As more and more names are taken, Chinese family names get increasingly unwieldy, and more easily distinguishable from the pithy old Thai names.

Age restrictions and other laws

Thai law requires that tourists **carry their original passports** at all times, though sometimes it's more practical to carry a photocopy and keep the original locked in a safety deposit. It is illegal for **under-18s** to buy cigarettes or alcohol or to drive. The age of consent is 15, but it is illegal to have sex with a prostitvte who is under 18. You must be 21 to be allowed into a **bar or club** (ID checks are often enforced in Bangkok). It is illegal for anyone to **gamble** in Thailand (though many do). **Smoking** is prohibited in all air-conditioned public buildings (including restaurants but usually excluding bars and clubs) and on air-conditioned trains, buses and planes; violators are subject to a B2000 fine. Dropping cigarette butts, **littering** and spitting in public places can also earn you a B2000 fine. There are fines for **overstaying your visa** (see p.34), **working without a permit**, and **not wearing a motorcycle helmet** and violating other **traffic laws** (see p.44).

Drugs

Drug-smuggling carries a maximum penalty in Thailand of death. **Dealing drugs** will get you anything from four years to life in a Thai prison; penalties depend on the drug and the amount involved. Travellers caught with even the smallest amount of drugs at airports and international borders are prosecuted for trafficking, and no one charged with trafficking offences gets bail. Heroin, amphetamines, LSD and ecstasy are classed as Category 1 drugs and carry the most severe penalties: even **possession** of Category 1 drugs for personal use can result in a **life sentence**. Away from international borders, most foreigners arrested in possession of small amounts of cannabis are released on bail, then fined and deported, but the law is complex and prison sentences are possible.

Despite occasional royal pardons, don't expect special treatment as a farang: you only need to read one of the first-hand accounts by foreign former prisoners (reviewed in "Books" on p.535) to get the picture. The **police** actively look for tourists doing drugs, reportedly searching people regularly and randomly on Thanon Khao San, for example. They have the power to order a urine test if they have reasonable grounds for suspicion, and even a positive result for marijuana consumption could lead to a year's imprisonment. Be wary also of **being shopped** by a farang or local dealer keen to earn a financial reward for a successful bust (there are setups at the Ko Pha Ngan full moon parties, for example), or having substances slipped into your luggage (simple enough to perpetrate unless all fastenings are secured with padlocks).

If you are arrested, ask for your embassy to be contacted immediately, which is your right under Thai law (see p.189 for phone numbers), and embassy staff will talk you through procedures. The British charity Prisoners Abroad (Ⓦwww.prisonersabroad.org.uk) carries a detailed Survival Guide on its website, which outlines what to expect if arrested in Thailand, from the point of apprehension through trial and conviction to life in a Thai jail; if contacted, the charity may also be able to offer direct support to a British citizen facing imprisonment in a Thai jail.

Crime and personal safety

As long as you keep your wits about you, you shouldn't encounter much trouble in Thailand. Theft and pickpocketing are two of the main problems – not surprising considering that a huge percentage of the local population scrape by on under US$5 per day – but the most common cause for concern is the number of con-artists who dupe gullible tourists into parting with their cash.

To **prevent theft**, most travellers prefer to carry their valuables with them at all times, but it's sometimes possible to leave your valuables in a hotel or guesthouse locker – the safest lockers are those that require your own padlock, as there are occasional reports of valuables being stolen by hotel staff. **Padlock your luggage** when leaving it in hotel or guesthouse rooms, as well as when consigning it to storage or taking it on public transport. Padlocks also come in handy as extra security for your room, particularly on the doors of beachfront bamboo huts.

Theft from some long-distance **overnight buses** is also a problem, with the majority of reported incidents taking place on the temptingly cheap buses run by private companies direct from Bangkok's Thanon Khao San (as opposed to those that depart from the government bus stations) to southern beach resorts. The best solution is to go direct from the bus stations.

Personal safety

On any bus, private or government, and on any train journey, never keep anything of

Governmental travel advisories

Australian Department of Foreign Affairs Ⓦwww.dfat.gov.au, Ⓦwww.smartraveller.gov.au.
British Foreign & Commonwealth Office Ⓦwww.fco.gov.uk.
Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs Ⓦwww.dfait-maeci.gc.ca.
Irish Department of Foreign Affairs Ⓦwww.foreignaffairs.gov.ie.
New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ⓦwww.mft.govt.nz.
South African Department of Foreign Affairs Ⓦwww.dfa.gov.za.
US State Department Ⓦtravel.state.gov.

value in luggage that is stored out of your sight and be wary of accepting food and drink from fellow passengers as it may be drugged. This might sound paranoid, but there have been enough **drug-muggings** for TAT to publish a specific warning about the problem. Drinks can also be spiked in bars and clubs, especially by sex-workers who later steal from their victim's room.

Violent crime against tourists is not common, but it does occur, and there have been several serious attacks on women travellers in the last few years. However, bearing in mind that over five million foreign tourists visit Thailand every year, the statistical likelihood of becoming a victim is extremely small. **Obvious precautions** for travellers of either sex include locking accessible windows and doors at night – preferably with your own padlock (doors in many of the simpler guest houses and beach bungalows are designed for this) – and not travelling alone at night in a taxi or tuk-tuk. Nor should you risk jumping into an unlicensed taxi at the airport in Bangkok at any time of day: there have been some very violent robberies in these, so take the well-marked licensed, metered taxis instead, or the airport bus (see p.94).

Unfortunately, it is also necessary for female tourists to think twice about spending time alone with a **monk**, as not all men of the cloth uphold the Buddhist precepts and there have been rapes and murders committed by men wearing the saffron robes of the monkhood. See p.525 for more about the changing Thai attitudes towards the monkhood.

Though unpalatable and distressing, Thailand's high-profile **sex industry** is relatively unthreatening for Western women, with its energy focused exclusively on farang men; it's also quite easily avoided, being contained within certain pockets of the capital and a couple of beach resorts.

As for **harassment** from men, it's hard to generalize, but most Western women find it less of a problem in Thailand than they do back home. Outside the main tourist spots, you're more likely to be of interest as a foreigner rather than a woman and, if travelling alone, as an object of concern rather than of sexual aggression.

Among hazards to watch out for in the natural world, **riptides** claim a number of tourist lives every year, particularly off Phuket, Ko Chang (Trat), Hua Hin, Cha-am and Ko Samui during stormy periods of the monsoon season, so always pay attention to warning signs and red flags, and always ask locally if unsure. **Jellyfish** can be a problem on any coast, especially just after a storm (see p.37 for further advice). For advice on **road safety** see p.44.

Regional issues

It's advisable to travel with a guide if you're going off the main roads in certain **border areas** or, if you're on a motorbike, to take advice before setting off.

Because of the **violence in the deep south**, all Western governments are currently advising against travel to or through the border provinces of Songkhla, Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, unless essential – see p.485 for further details. For up-to-the-minute advice on current political troublespots, consult your government's travel advisory.

Scams

Despite the best efforts of guidebook writers, TAT and the Thai tourist police, countless travellers to Thailand get scammed every year. Nearly all **scams** are easily avoided if you're on your guard against anyone who makes an unnatural effort to befriend you. We have outlined the main scams in the relevant sections of this guide, but con-artists are nothing if not creative, so if in doubt walk away at the earliest opportunity. The worst areas for scammers are the busy tourist centres, including many parts of Bangkok and the main beach resorts.

Many **tuk-tuk drivers** earn most of their living through securing **commissions** from tourist-oriented shops; this is especially true in Bangkok, where they will do their damnedest to get you to go to a gem shop (see below). The most common tactic is for drivers to pretend that the Grand Palace or other major sight you intended to visit is closed for the day (they usually invent a plausible reason, such as a festival or royal occasion; see p.125 for more), and to then offer to take you on a round-city tour instead, perhaps even for free. The tour will invariably include a visit to a gem shop. The easiest way to avoid all this is to take a

metered taxi; if you're fixed on taking a tuk-tuk, ignore any tuk-tuk that is parked up or loitering and be firm about where you want to go.

Self-styled **tourist guides**, **touts** and anyone else who might introduce themselves as **students** or **businesspeople** and offer to take you somewhere of interest, or invite you to meet their family, are often the first piece of bait in a well-honed chain of con-artists. If you bite, chances are you'll end up either at a gem shop or in a gambling den, or, at best, at a tour operator or hotel that you had not planned to patronize. This is not to say that you should never accept an invitation from a local person, but be extremely wary of doing so following a street encounter in Bangkok or the resorts. Tourist guides' ID cards are easily faked.

For many of these characters the goal is to get you inside a dodgy **gem shop**, nearly all of which are located in Bangkok. There is a full rundown of advice on how to avoid falling for the notorious low-grade gems scam on p.182, but the bottom line is that if you are not experienced at buying and trading in valuable gems you will definitely be ripped off, possibly even to the tune of several thousand pounds or dollars. Check the 2Bangkok website's account of a typical gem scam (ⓦwww.2bangkok.com/2bangkok/Scams/Sapphire.shtml) before you shell out any cash at all.

A less common but potentially more frightening scam involves a similar cast of warm-up artists leading tourists into a **gambling** game. The scammers invite their victim home on an innocent-sounding pretext, get out a pack of cards, and then set about fleecing the incomer in any number of subtle ways. Often this can be especially scary as the venue is likely to be far from hotels or recognizable landmarks. You're unlikely to get any sympathy from police, as gambling is **illegal** in Thailand.

Reporting a crime or emergency

In emergencies, contact the English-speaking **tourist police**, who maintain a 24-hour toll-free nationwide line (ⓣ1155) and have offices in the main tourist centres – getting in touch with the tourist police first is invariably more efficient than directly contacting the local police, ambulance or fire service. The tourist police's job is to offer advice and tell you what to do next, but they do not file crime reports, which must be done at the nearest police station. TAT has a special department for mediating between tourists, police and accused persons (particularly shopkeepers and tour agents) – the Tourist Assistance Center, or **TAC**; it's based in the TAT office on Thanon Rajdamnoen Nok, Bangkok (daily 8.30am– 4.30pm; ⓣ02 281 5051).

Gay and lesbian Thailand

Buddhist tolerance and a national abhorrence of confrontation and victimization combine to make Thai society relatively tolerant of homosexuality, if not exactly positive about same-sex relationships. Most Thais are extremely private and discreet about being gay, generally pursuing a "don't ask, don't tell" understanding with their family. The majority of people are horrified by the idea of gay-bashing and generally regard it as unthinkable to spurn a child or relative for being gay.

Hardly any Thai celebrities are out, yet the predilections of several respected social, political and entertainment figures are widely known and accepted. **Transvestites** (known as *katoey* or "ladyboys") and **transsexuals** are also a lot more visible in Thailand than in the West. You'll find cross-dressers doing ordinary jobs, even in small upcountry towns, and there are a number of transvestites and transsexuals in the public eye too – including national volleyball stars and champion *muay thai* boxers. The government tourist office vigorously promotes the transvestite cabarets in Pattaya, Phuket and Bangkok, all of which are advertised as family entertainment. *Katoey* also regularly appear as characters in soap operas, TV comedies and films, where they are depicted as harmless figures of fun.

There is no mention of homosexuality at all in Thai law, which means that the age of consent for gay sex is fifteen, the same as for heterosexuals. However, this also means that gay rights are not protected under Thai law.

The scene

Thailand's gay scene is mainly focused on **mainstream venues** like karaoke bars, restaurants, massage parlours, gyms, saunas and escort agencies. For the sake of discretion, gay venues are usually intermingled with equivalent straight venues. As in the straight scene, venues reflect class and status differences. Expensive international-style places are very popular in Bangkok, attracting upper- and middle-class gays, many of whom have travelled or been educated abroad and developed Western tastes. These places also attract a contingent of Thais seeking foreign sugar daddies. The biggest concentrations of farang-friendly gay bars and clubs are found in Bangkok, Phuket and Pattaya, and are listed in the relevant accounts in the guide chapters (note that you must be 21 years old to enter a nightclub in Thailand, and ID checks are often enforced). The gay communities of Bangkok, Phuket and Pattaya all host flamboyant annual **Gay Pride festivals** (check upcoming dates on the websites listed below). For a detailed guide to the gay and lesbian scene throughout the country, see the *Utopia Guide to Thailand* by John Goss, which can be downloaded via ⓦwww.utopia-asia.com.

Thailand's gay scene is heavily male, and there are hardly any **lesbian**-only venues, though Bangkok has a few mixed gay bars. Thai lesbians generally eschew the word lesbian, which in Thailand is associated with male fantasies, instead referring to themselves as either *tom* (for tomboy) or *dee* (for lady). Where possible, we've listed lesbian meeting-places, but unless otherwise specified, gay means male throughout this guide.

Although excessively physical displays of affection are frowned upon for both heterosexuals and homosexuals, Western gay couples should get no hassle about being seen together in public – it's much more acceptable, and common, in fact, for friends of the same sex (gay or not) to walk hand-in-hand, than for heterosexual couples to do so.

The farang-oriented gay **sex industry** is a tiny but highly visible part of Thailand's gay scene. With its tawdry floor shows and host services, it bears a dispiriting resemblance to the straight sex trade, and is similarly most active in Bangkok, Pattaya and Patong (on Phuket). Like their female counterparts in the heterosexual fleshpots, many of the boys working in the gay sex bars that dominate these districts are under age; note that anyone caught having sex with a prostitute below the age of 18 faces imprisonment. A significant number of gay prostitutes are gay by economic necessity rather than by inclination. As with the straight sex scene, we do not list commercial gay sex bars in the guide.

Information and contacts for gay travellers

Anjaree PO Box 322, Rajdamnoen PO, Bangkok 10200 ⓔanjaree@loxinfo.com. General information on the lesbian community in Thailand.

Dreaded Ned's ⓦwww.dreadedned.com. Events listings and information on almost every gay venue in the country.

Lesla ⓦwww.lesla.com. Thailand's largest lesbian organization hosts regular events and runs a web-board.

Long Yang Club ⓦwww.longyangclub.org/thailand. This international organization was founded to promote friendship between men of Western and Eastern origin and runs regular socials.

Utopia ⓦwww.utopia-asia.com and ⓦwww.utopia-asia.com/womthai.htm. Asia's best gay and lesbian website lists clubs, events, accommodation and organizations for gays and lesbians and has useful links to other sites in Asia and the rest of the world. Its offshoot, Utopia Tours, is a gay-oriented travel agency offering trips and guides within Thailand and the rest of Asia; tours can be booked through Door East, *Tarntawan Palace Hotel*, 119/5–10 Thanon Suriwong (ⓣ02 238 3227, ⓦwww.utopia-tours.com).

Travelling with children

There's plenty in Thailand to appeal to children – especially the beach, the swimming pools and the water-based activities in the more developed resorts.

Many **dive centres** will teach the PADI children's scuba courses on request: their Bubblemaker programme is open to 8-year-olds and the Junior Open Water is designed for anyone over ten. An increasing number of **upmarket hotels** in the big resorts arrange special activities for kids: the *Laguna Resort* hotels complex on Ao Bang Tao, Phuket (see p.400) is particularly recommended for its family-friendly accommodation and kids' activities camp, as are the *Novotel Phuket Resort*, and the *Holiday Inn*, both on Patong Beach, Phuket (p.404), and the *JW Marriott Phuket Resort and Spa* on Phuket's Hat Mai Khao (p.397). The activity-centred Club Med chain of hotels (ⓦwww.clubmed.com) also has a resort on Phuket (see p.411). Other hotels that offer plenty of diversions for active teenagers include *Le Royal Meridien Baan Taling Ngam* on Ko Samui (see p.317) and the *Amari Trang* in Trang (see p.493). Most of these hotels will also provide a **babysitting** service.

Older children will relish the cheap supply of electronic games and brand-name clothing on sale in the main tourist centres, and might enjoy taking up the countless offers from beach masseuses to "plait your hair" and "have manicure".

Despite its lack of obvious child-centred activities, many parents find that the moderately developed island of Ko Lanta (see p.465) makes a good destination for kids of all ages, with reasonably priced accommodation, fairly uncrowded sandy beaches and safe seas. However, as with almost any non-mainstream destination in Thailand, the nearest top-class health centre is several hours' away from Ko Lanta, in Phuket. On Ko Lanta and many other beaches, open-air shorefront restaurants are the norm, so adults can eat in relative peace while kids play within view.

Active children also enjoy the country's **national parks** and their waterfalls, plus the opportunities to go **elephant-riding**. Bangkok has several child-friendly **theme parks** and activity centres, listed on p.175, as does the beach resort of Pattaya (see p.210).

Practicalities

Many of the expensive **hotels** listed in this guide offer special deals for families, usually allowing one or two under-twelves to share their parents' room for free, as long as no extra bedding is required. It's often possible to cram two adults and two children into the double rooms in inexpensive and mid-range hotels (as opposed to guest houses), as beds in these places are usually big enough for two (see p.48). An increasing number of guest houses now offer three-person rooms, and some even provide special family accommodation: see accommodation listings throughout the book for details. Decent cots are provided free in the bigger hotels, and in some smaller ones (though cots in these places can be a bit grotty).

Few museums or transport companies offer student reductions, but in some cases children get **discounts**; these vary a lot, one of the more bizarre provisos being the State Railway's regulation that a child aged three to twelve qualifies for half-fare only if under 150cm tall; in some stations you'll see a measuring scale painted onto the ticket-hall wall. On most domestic flights, under-twos pay ten percent of the full fare, and under-twelves pay fifty percent.

Although most Thai babies don't wear them, **disposable nappies** (diapers) are sold in Thailand at convenience stores, pharmacies and supermarkets in big resorts and sizeable towns; for longer, more out-of-the-way journeys and stays on lonely islands and beaches, consider bringing some washable ones as backup. A **changing mat** is another necessity as there are few public toilets in Thailand, let alone ones with baby facilities (though posh hotels are always a useful option). If your baby is on powdered milk, it might be an idea to bring some of that; you can certainly get it in Thailand but it may not taste the same as at home. Thai women do not **breastfeed** in public. Dried **baby food**, too, could be worth taking, though you can get international-brand baby food in big towns and resorts, and some parents find restaurant-cooked rice and bananas go down just as well.

For touring, child-carrier backpacks are ideal. Opinions are divided on whether or not it's worth bringing a **buggy** or three-wheeled **stroller**. Where they exist, Thailand's pavements are bumpy at best, and there's an almost total absence of ramps; sand is especially difficult for buggies, though less so for three-wheelers. Buggies and strollers do, however, come in handy for feeding and even bedding small children, as highchairs and cots are only provided in the more upmarket hotels. You can buy buggies fairly cheaply in most moderate-sized Thai towns, but if you bring your own and then wish you hadn't, most hotels and guest houses will keep it for you until you leave. Taxis and car-rental companies never provide baby **car seats**, and even if you bring your own you'll often find there are no seatbelts to strap them in with.

Children's **clothes** are also very cheap in Thailand, and have the advantage of being designed for the climate. Even if you've forgotten a crucial piece of children's equipment, you'll probably find it in the nearest big-city department store, nearly all of which have dedicated kids' sections selling everything from bottles and dummies. There's even a branch of Mothercare in Bangkok.

Even more than their parents, children need protecting from the sun, unsafe drinking water, heat and unfamiliar **food**. All that chilli in particular may be a problem, even with older kids; consider packing a jar of Marmite or equivalent child's favourite, so that you can always rely on toast if the local food doesn't go down so well. As with adults, you should be careful about unwashed fruit and salads and about dishes that have been left uncovered for a long time (see p.51). As diarrhoea could be dangerous for a child, rehydration solutions (see under "Health", p.38) are vital if your child goes down with it. Other significant **hazards** include thundering traffic; huge waves, strong currents and jellyfish; and the **sun** – not least because many beaches offer only limited shade, if at all. Sunhats, sunblock and waterproof suntan lotions are essential, and can be bought in the major resorts. You should also make sure, if possible, that your child is aware of the dangers of **rabies**; keep children away from **animals**, especially dogs and monkeys, and ask your medical adviser about rabies jabs.

Information and advice

Bambi Ⓦwww.bambi-bangkok.org. The website of the Bangkok-based expat parents' group has tips on parents' common concerns, in particular health issues, as well as ideas for child-friendly activities in Thailand.

Kids To Go Ⓦthorntree.lonelyplanet.com. The Kids To Go branch of this travel forum gets quite a lot of postings from parents who've already taken their kids to Thailand.

Thailand 4 Kids Ⓦwww.thailand4kids.com. Sells an e-book guide covering the practicalities of family holidays in Thailand.

Travel essentials

Addresses

Thai **addresses** can be immensely confusing, mainly because property is often numbered twice, first to show which real estate lot it stands in, and then to distinguish where it is on that lot. Thus 154/7–10 Thanon Rajdamnoen means the building is on lot 154 and occupies numbers 7–10. There's an additional idiosyncrasy in the way Thai roads are sometimes

Charities and volunteer projects

Reassured by the plethora of well-stocked shopping plazas, efficient services and apparent abundance in the ricefields, it is easy to forget that life is extremely hard for many people in Thailand. Countless **charities** work with Thailand's many poor and disadvantaged communities: listed below are a few that would welcome help in some way from visitors. The website of the *Bangkok Post* also carries an extensive list of charitable foundations and projects in Thailand at ⓦwww.bangkokpost.com/outlookwecare.

Human Development Foundation 100/11 Kae Ha Klong Toey 4, Thanon Damrongrathhaphipat, Klong Toey, Bangkok ⓣ02 671 5313, ⓦwww.mercycentre.org. Since 1972, this organization – founded by locally famous Catholic priest Father Joe Maier – has been providing education and support for Bangkok's street kids and slum-dwellers as well as caring for those with HIV-AIDS. It now runs more than thirty kindergartens in Bangkok's slums and is staffed almost entirely by people who grew up in the slums themselves. Contact the centre for information about donations, sponsorship and volunteering, or visit it to purchase cards and gifts. Father Joe's book, *The Slaughterhouse: Stories from Bangkok's Klong Toey Slum*, is an eye-opening insight into this side of Thai life that tourists rarely encounter; it's available from most Bangkok bookshops and profits go to the Foundation (see p.535 for a review).

North Andaman Tsunami Relief (NATR) Khuraburi ⓣ087 917 7165, ⓦwww.northandamantsunamirelief.com. This farang–Thai NGO has initiated a lot of post-tsunami reconstruction projects for the many devastated villages in the Khuraburi area and welcomes donations to help maintain the good work. It has also established a homestay programme at local fishing villages, Andaman Discoveries (ⓦwww.andamandiscoveries.com), to help revitalize the local economy; for more details about this see p.368.

The Students' Education Trust (SET) ⓦwww.thaistudentcharity.org. High-school and further education in Thailand is a luxury that the poorest kids cannot afford – not only is there a lack of funds for fees, books, uniforms and even bus fares, but they often need to work to help support the family. Many are sent to live in temples to ease the burden on their relatives. The SET was founded by British-born Phra Peter Pannapadipo to help these kids pursue their education and escape from the poverty trap. He lived as a Thai monk for ten years and tells the heart-breaking stories of some of the boys at his temple in his book, *Little Angels: The real-life stories of twelve Thai novice monks* (see p.535 for a review). SET welcomes donations and sponsorship; see their website for details.

Thai Child Development Foundation Pha To ⓦwww.thaichilddevelopment.org. This small Thai-Dutch-run village project in south Thailand helps house and educate needy local children. The foundation welcomes donations of games, toys, clothes and money, and takes on volunteers for 1–3 months, but you can also support it by joining one of the eco-tours or homestay programmes organized by its sister outfit Runs 'N Roses (ⓣ086 172 1090, ⓦwww.runsnroses.com), described on p.290.

Tsunami Volunteer Center Khao Lak ⓣ089 882 8840, ⓦwww.tsunamivolunteer.net. Within days of the 2004 tsunami, a Thai NGO established this project in Khao Lak, site of the worst devastation along Thailand's Andaman coast. In its first year of operation the centre coordinated reconstruction and regeneration tasks for hundreds of volunteers but there are still many projects on the go and the centre continues to welcome donations as well as volunteers. The main projects involve construction work, IT and English teaching; minimum commitment is two weeks. Several other tsunami relief organizations also work in the Khao Lak area; see p.380 for more details.

We-Train International House Bangkok ⓣ02 967 8550–4, ⓦwww.we-train.co.th. Run by the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women (APSW), this is a hotel close to Bangkok's Don Muang airport whose profits go towards helping APSW support, house and train disadvantaged women and children. See p.95 for details.

named: in large cities a minor road running off a major road is often numbered as a soi ("lane" or "alley", though it may be a sizeable thoroughfare), rather than given its own street name. Thanon Sukhumvit for example – Bangkok's longest – has minor roads numbered Soi 1 to Soi 103, with odd numbers on one side of the road and even on the other; so a Thanon

Sukhumvit address could read something like 27/9–11 Soi 15, Thanon Sukhumvit, which would mean the property occupies numbers 9–11 on lot 27 on minor road number 15 running off Thanon Sukhumvit.

Contact lens solutions

Opticians in all reasonable-sized towns sell international brand-name **contact lens** cleaning and disinfection solutions.

Contraceptives

Condoms (*meechai*) are sold in all pharmacies and in many hairdressers and village shops as well. Birth-control **pills** can be bought in Bangkok (see p.189) and at some pharmacies in major towns and resorts; supplies of any other contraceptives should be brought from home.

Costs

Thailand can be a very cheap place to travel. At the bottom of the scale, you can manage on a **daily budget** of about B600 (£9/US$15) if you're willing to opt for basic accommodation, stay away from the more expensive resorts like Phuket, Ko Samui and Ko Phi Phi, and eat, drink and travel as the locals do. On this budget, you'll be spending under B200 for a dorm bed or single room (less if you share the cost of a double room), around B200 on three meals (eating mainly at night markets and simple noodle shops, and eschewing beer), and the rest on travel (sticking mainly to non-air-con buses and third-class trains) and incidentals. With extras like air-conditioning in rooms and on long-distance buses and trains, taking the various forms of taxi rather than buses or shared songthaews for cross-town journeys, and a meal and a couple of beers in a more touristy restaurant, a day's outlay would look more like B1000 (£15/US$25). Staying in comfortable, upmarket hotels and eating in the more exclusive restaurants, you should be able to live in great comfort for around B2000 a day (£30/US$50).

Travellers soon get so used to the low cost of living in Thailand that they start **bargaining** at every available opportunity, much as Thai people do. Although it's expected practice for a lot of commercial transactions, particularly at markets and when hiring tuk-tuks and taxis (though not in supermarkets or department stores), bargaining is a delicate art that requires humour, tact and patience. If your price is way out of line, the vendor's vehement refusal should be enough to make you increase your offer: never forget that the few pennies or cents you're making such a fuss over will go a lot further in a Thai person's hands than in your own.

It's rare that foreigners can bargain a price down as low as a Thai could, anyway, while **two-tier pricing** has been made official at government-run sights, as a kind of informal tourist tax: at national museums and historical parks, for example, foreigners often pay a B30–40 admission charge while Thais get in for B10; and at national parks, foreigners have to pay B200 entry while Thais pay just B20. A number of privately owned tourist attractions follow a similar two-tier system, posting an inflated price in English for foreigners and a lower price in Thai for locals.

Customs regulations

The **duty-free** allowance on entry to Thailand is 200 cigarettes (or 250g of tobacco) and a litre of spirits or wine.

To **export antiques or religious artefacts** – especially Buddha images – from Thailand, you need to have a licence granted by the Fine Arts Department, which can be obtained through the Office of Archeology and National Museums, 81/1 Thanon Si Ayutthaya (near the National Library), Bangkok (☎02 628 5032), or Thalang Museum on Phuket (see p.417). Applications take at least two working days and need to be accompanied by the object itself, two postcard-sized colour photos of it, taken face-on and against a white background, and photocopies of the applicant's passport; furthermore, if the object is a Buddha image, the passport photocopies need to be certified by your embassy in Bangkok. Some antiques shops can organize all this for you.

Departure taxes

The international **departure tax** on all foreigners leaving Thailand by air is B500, due to rise to B700 on February 1, 2007. Domestic departure taxes are included in the price of the ticket, except at Bangkok Airways' Samui Airport, where a departure tax of B400 is payable.

Electricity

Mains **electricity** is supplied at 220 volts AC and is available at all but the most remote villages and basic beach huts. Where electricity is supplied by generators and/or solar power, for example on the smaller, less populated islands, it is often rationed to evenings only. If you're packing phone and camera chargers, a hair-dryer, laptop or other appliance, you'll need to take a set of travel-plug adapters with you as several plug types are commonly in use, most usually with two round pins, but also with two flat-blade pins, and sometimes with both options. Check out ⓦwww.kropla.com for a very helpful list, complete with pictures, of the different sockets, voltage and phone plugs used in Thailand.

Insurance

Most visitors to Thailand will need to take out **specialist travel insurance**, though you should check exactly what's covered. Policies generally exclude so-called **dangerous sports** unless an extra premium is paid: in Thailand this can mean such things as scuba-diving, whitewater rafting and trekking.

Rough Guides has teamed up with Columbus Direct to offer you travel insurance that can be tailored to suit your needs. Products include a low-cost **backpacker** option for long stays; a **short break** option for city getaways; a typical **holiday package** option; and others. There are also annual **multi-trip** policies for those who travel regularly. Different sports and activities, such as trekking, can be usually be covered if required. See our website (ⓦwww.roughguidesinsurance.com) for eligibility and purchasing options. Alternatively, call in the UK ⓣ0870/033 9988, in the US ⓣ1-800/749-4922, in Australia ⓣ1-300/669 999 or elsewhere ⓣ+44 870/890 2843.

Internet

Internet access is very widespread and very cheap in Thailand. You'll find traveller-oriented **Internet cafés** in every touristed town and resort in the country – there are at least twenty in the Banglamphu district of Bangkok, for example – and even remote islands like Ko Mak and Ko Phayam provide Internet access via satellite phones. Competition keeps prices low: upcountry you could expect to pay as little as B20 per hour, while rates in tourist centres average B1 per minute. Nearly every mid-sized town in Thailand also offers a public Internet service, called **Catnet**, at the government telephone office (usually located inside or adjacent to the main post office). To use the service, you need to buy a B100 card with a Catnet PIN (available at all phone offices), which gives you around three hours of Internet time at any of these public terminals.

If you plan to email from your **laptop** in Thailand, be advised that very few budget guest houses and cheap hotels have telephone sockets in the room. At the other end of the scale, luxury hotels charge astronomical rates for international calls, though many now offer broadband, or even wireless access. One potentially useful way round the cost issue is to become a temporary subscriber to the Thai ISP CS Loxinfo (ⓣ02 263 8222, ⓦwww.csloxinfo.com). Their Webnet deal, for example, with local dial-up numbers in every province in Thailand, is aimed at international businesspeople and tourists and can be bought online; it allows you 12 hours of Internet access for B160, 30 hours for B380 or 63 hours for B750. The usual phone plug in Thailand is the American standard RJ11 phone jack. See ⓦwww.kropla.com for detailed advice on how to set up your modem before you go, and how to hardwire phone plugs where necessary.

Laundry

Guest houses and hotels all over the country run low-cost, same-day **laundry** services. In some places you pay per item, in others you're charged by the kilo (generally from B30–50/kg); ironing is often included in the price.

Left luggage

Most major train stations have **left luggage** facilities, where bags can be stored for up to twenty days (for B10–40 per item per day); at bus stations you can usually persuade someone official to look after your stuff for a few hours. Many guest houses and hotels also offer an inexpensive and reliable service.

Mail

Overseas mail usually takes around seven days from Bangkok, a little longer from the more isolated areas. **Post office hours** are generally Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm, Sat 9am–noon; some close Mon–Fri noon–1pm and may stay open until 6pm. Almost all main post offices across the country operate a **poste restante** service and will hold letters for one to three months. Mail should be addressed: *Name* (family name underlined or capitalized), Poste Restante, GPO, *Town or City*, Thailand. It will be filed by surname, though it's always wise to check under your first initial as well. The smaller post offices pay scant attention to who takes what, but in the busier GPOs you need to show your passport, pay B1 per letter or B2 per parcel received, and sign for them.

Post offices are the best places to buy **stamps**, though hotels and guest houses often sell them too, charging an extra B1 per stamp. An airmail letter of under 10g costs B17 to send to Europe or Australia and B19 to North America; standard-sized postcards cost B12, larger ones and aerogrammes B15, regardless of where they're going. All **parcels** must be officially boxed and sealed (for a small fee) at special counters within main post offices, or in a private outlet just outside. In tourist centres (especially at Bangkok's GPO) be prepared to queue, first for the packaging, then for the weighing and then again for the buying of stamps. The **surface** rate for parcels to the UK is B950 for the first kg, then B175/kg; to the US B550 for the first kg, then B140/kg; and to Australia B650 for the first kg, then B110/kg; the package should reach its destination in three months. The **airmail** rate for parcels to the UK is B900 for the first kg, then B380/kg; to the US B950 for the first kg, then B500/kg; and to Australia B750 for the first kg, then B350/kg; the package should reach its destination in one or two weeks.

Maps

For most major destinations, the **maps** in this book should be all you need, though you may want to supplement them with larger-scale maps of Bangkok and the whole country. Bangkok bookshops are the best source of these; where appropriate, detailed local maps and their stockists are recommended in the relevant chapters of this guide. If you want to buy a map before you get there, Rough Guides' 1:1,200,000 map of Thailand is a good option – and, since it's printed on special rip-proof paper, it won't tear. Reasonable alternatives include the 1:1,500,000 maps produced by Nelles and Bartholomew.

For **drivers**, PN Map Centre's large-format atlas *Thailand Highway Map* is good, and is updated regularly; it's available at most bookstores in Thailand where English-language material is sold. If you can't get hold of that, you could go for the relevant 1:300,000 maps of each province published by PN Map Centre and sold at better bookshops in Bangkok and all over the country; some of the detail on these maps is only in Thai, but they should have enough English to be useful. Better than both the above are the excellent World Class Drives map-booklets, which are handed out free to customers of Budget car rental: detailed and almost unfailingly accurate, these are designed for tourists, but only cover certain parts of the country.

Money

Thailand's unit of currency is the **baht** (abbreviated to "B"), divided into 100 satang – which are rarely seen these days. Notes come in B20, B50, B100, B500 and B1000 denominations, inscribed with Western as well as Thai numerals, and increasing in size according to value. The coinage is more confusing, because new shapes and sizes circulate alongside older ones, which sometimes have only Thai numerals. There are three different silver one-baht coins, all legal tender; the smallest of these is the newest version, and the one accepted by public call-boxes. Silver two-baht pieces are slightly bigger; silver five-baht pieces are bigger again and have a copper rim; ten-baht coins have a small brass centre encircled by a silver ring.

At the time of writing, **exchange rates** were averaging B40 to US$1, B50 to €1 and B70 to £1. A good site for current exchange rates is Ⓦwww.xe.com. Note that Thailand has no black market in foreign currency. Because of severe currency fluctuations in the late 1990s, some tourist-oriented businesses now quote their prices in **US dollars**, particularly luxury hotels and dive centres.

Banking hours are Monday to Friday from 8.30am to 3.30 or 4.30pm, but exchange kiosks in the main tourist centres are always open till at least 5pm, sometimes 10pm, and upmarket hotels change money 24 hours a day. The Suvarnabhumi Airport exchange counters also operate 24 hours, while exchange kiosks at overseas airports with flights to Thailand usually keep Thai currency.

Sterling and US dollar **traveller's cheques** are accepted by banks, exchange booths and upmarket hotels in every sizeable Thai town, and most places also deal in a variety of other currencies; everyone offers better rates for cheques than for straight cash. Generally, a total of B33 in commission and duty is charged per cheque – though kiosks and hotels in isolated places may charge extra – so you'll save money if you deal in larger cheque denominations.

American Express, Visa and MasterCard **credit and debit cards** are accepted at top hotels as well as in some posh restaurants, department stores, tourist shops and travel agents, but surcharging of up to seven percent is rife, and theft and forgery are major industries – always demand the carbon copies, and never leave cards in baggage storage. If you have a personal identification number (PIN) for your debit or credit card, you can also withdraw cash from hundreds of 24-hour **ATMs** around the country. Almost every town now has at least one bank with an ATM that accepts Visa/Plus cards and MasterCard/Cirrus cards, and there are a growing number of stand-alone ATMs in supermarkets. For an up-to-the-minute list of ATM locations in Thailand, check Ⓦwww.mastercard.com and Ⓦwww.visa.com.

Newspapers and magazines

Of the hundreds of **Thai-language newspapers and magazines** published every week, the sensationalist tabloid *Thai Rath* attracts the widest readership, and the independent *Siam Rath*, founded by M.R. Kukrit Pramoj (see p.155), and the broadly similar *Matichon* are the most intellectual.

Alongside these, two daily **English-language papers** – the *Bangkok Post* (Ⓦwww.bangkokpost.com) and the *Nation* (Ⓦwww.nationmultimedia.com) – are capable of adopting a fairly critical attitude to governmental goings-on and cover major domestic and international stories as well as tourist-related issues. Of the two, the *Bangkok Post* tends to focus more on international stories, while the *Nation* has the most in-depth coverage of Thai and Southeast Asian issues. Both are sold at most newsstands in the capital as well as in major provincial towns and tourist resorts; the more isolated places receive their few copies at least one day late. *Bangkok Metro*, the capital's monthly English-language listings **magazine**, as well as reviews and previews of events in the city, carries lively articles on cultural and contemporary life in Thailand.

The more traveller-oriented monthly magazine *Untamed Travel* (formerly *Farang*) reviews bars, clubs, restaurants and guest houses in Thailand's most popular dozen tourist destinations and also prints some interesting features on contemporary Southeast Asian culture; it is sold most widely in Bangkok but is also available in some major tourist centres.

You can also pick up **foreign publications** such as *Newsweek*, *Time* and the *International Herald Tribune* in Bangkok and the major resorts; from Monday to Friday, the *IHT* now carries an English-language supplement devoted to Thailand, *Thai Day.* English-language bookstores such as Bookazine and some expensive hotels carry air-freighted copies of foreign national newspapers for at least B50 a copy. The weekly current affairs magazine *Far Eastern Economic Review* is also worth looking out for; available in major bookshops and at newsstands in tourist centres, it generally offers a very readable selection of articles on Thailand and the rest of Asia.

Opening hours and public holidays

Most **shops** open at least Monday to Saturday from about 8am to 8pm, while department stores operate daily from around 10am to 9pm. Private office hours are generally Monday to Friday 8am to 5pm and Saturday 8am to noon, though in tourist areas these hours are longer, with weekends worked like any other day. Government offices work Monday to Friday 8.30am to noon and 1 to 4.30pm, and national museums tend to stick to these hours too, but some close on Mondays and Tuesdays rather than at weekends.

Many tourists only register **national holidays** because trains and buses suddenly get extraordinarily crowded: although banks and government offices shut on these days, most shops and tourist-oriented businesses carry on regardless, and TAT branches continue to dispense information. The only time an inconvenient number of shops, restaurants and hotels do close is during **Chinese New Year**, which, though not marked as an official national holiday, brings many businesses to a standstill for several days in late January or February. You'll notice it particularly in the south, where most service industries are Chinese-managed.

Thais use both the Western Gregorian **calendar** and a Buddhist calendar – the Buddha is said to have died (or entered Nirvana) in the year 543 BC, so Thai dates start from that point: thus 2007 AD becomes 2550 BE (Buddhist Era).

National holidays

Jan 1 Western New Year's Day
Feb (day of full moon) Maha Puja: commemorates the Buddha preaching to a spontaneously assembled crowd of 1250.
April 6 Chakri Day: the founding of the Chakri dynasty.
April (usually 13–15) Songkhran: Thai New Year.
May 1 National Labour Day
May 5 Coronation Day
May (early in the month) Royal Ploughing Ceremony: marks start of rice-planting season.
May (day of full moon) Visakha Puja: the holiest of all Buddhist holidays, which celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha.
July (day of full moon) Khao Pansa: the start of the annual three-month Buddhist rains retreat, when new monks are ordained.
Aug 12 Queen's birthday
Oct 23 Chulalongkorn Day: the anniversary of Rama V's death.
Dec 5 King's birthday: also celebrated as national Fathers' Day.
Dec 10 Constitution Day
Dec 31 Western New Year's Eve

Phones

Local **calls within Thailand** are very cheap (as little as B1 for 3min from a coin payphone), but inter-provincial rates can be as high as B12/minute. To save fiddling around with coins, which will soon be gobbled up on a long-distance call, you may well be better off buying a domestic TOT **phonecard** for B100; this comes with a PIN number, is available from hotels and a wide variety of shops, and can be used in designated orange or green cardphones or in stainless steel payphones. In some provincial towns, enterprising mobile-phone owners hang out on the main streets, often with a simple fold-out table and makeshift cardboard sign, offering cheap long-distance, and sometimes international, calls.

When **dialling** any number in Thailand, you must now always preface it with what used to be the area code, even when dialling from the same area; in this book we've separated off this code, for easy recognition (you'll still come across plenty of business cards and brochures which give only the old local number, to which you'll need to add the area code). Where we've given several line numbers – eg ☎02 431 1802–9 – you can substitute the last digit, 2, with any digit between 3 and 9. For **directory enquiries** within Thailand, call ☎1133.

All mobile phone numbers in Thailand have recently been changed from nine to ten digits, by adding the lucky number "8" after the initial zero (again you're likely to come across cards and brochures giving the old number). Note also, however, that Thais tend to change mobile-phone providers – and therefore numbers – comparatively frequently, in search of a better deal.

One final local idiosyncrasy: Thai phone books list people by their first name, not their family name.

Mobile phones

An increasing number of tourists are taking their **mobile phones** to Thailand. Visitors from the US may well need to have a dual- or tri-band phone, but GSM 900Hz and 1800Hz, the systems most commonly found in other parts of the world, are both available in Thailand. Most foreign networks have links with Thai networks, but it's worth checking with your phone provider before you travel; it's also worth checking how much coverage there is for your network within Thailand. For a full list of network types and providers in Thailand, along with coverage maps and roaming partners, go to ⓦwww.gsmworld.com/roaming.

If you want to use your mobile a lot in Thailand, it may well be worth getting hold of a rechargeable **Thai SIM card** with a local phone number. An AIS 1-2-Call card (ⓦwww.ais.co.th) will give you the widest coverage in Thailand, and top-up cards are available at 7-11 stores across the country. Their call rates aren't the cheapest, however, at B5 for the first minute, then B2 per minute within Thailand; international calls can cost as much as around B30 per minute, but you can get far cheaper rates (B7/min to the UK, for example) by using voice-over-internet protocol (VOIP; see below), prefixing the relevant country code with ⓣ009; texts cost B2 domestic, around B9 international.

Your own network operator may be able to give you useful advice about exchanging SIM cards before you leave home, but the best place in Thailand to buy a card and have any necessary technical adjustments made is the Mah Boon Krong Centre in Bangkok (see p.178); an AIS 1-2-Call SIM card, for example, will cost you around B220, including your first B50 worth of calls. Because of heightened security fears, you'll need to take your passport along and fill in a simple registration form when you buy a rechargeable Thai SIM card.

International calls

There are two basic ways of making **international calls** from Thailand: by international direct-dialling (IDD), prefixing the relevant country code with ⓣ**001**; and far more cheaply, by voice over internet protocol (VOIP), prefixing the relevant country code with ⓣ**009**.

001 calls to North America cost B9/minute, to Australia or the UK B18/minute and to New Zealand B22/minute. For most other countries, there are three time periods with different **rates**: the most expensive, or standard, time to call is from 7am to 9pm (economy rate applies on Sundays); the economy period runs from 9pm to midnight and 5am to 7am; the reduced rate applies between midnight and 5am. The per-minute rate for a direct-dial call to Ireland is B30 standard, B24 economy and B24 reduced, to South Africa B45/B36/B32.

You can use these government rates by buying a **Thaicard**, the international phonecard issued by CAT (Communications Authority of Thailand). Available in B100–3000 denominations at post offices and many shops, Thaicards can be used in designated purple cardphones – if you can't happen to find one, head for the nearest government telephone centre, which is usually located within or adjacent to a town's main post office.

There's also a private international cardphone system called **Lenso**, which operates in Bangkok and the biggest resorts. To use Lenso's yellow phones, you either need a special Lenso phonecard (available from shops near the phones in B200, B300 and B500 denominations), or you can use a credit card. Rates, however, are ten percent higher than government IDD rates.

You can take advantage of the cheaper rates of **009 calls** by buying one of CAT's **Phone Net** cards, which come in denominations of B300 and B500. They're available from the same outlets as Thaicards (see above) and can be used in the same cardphones. Whatever time of day it is, tariffs are B5/minute to North America, B6/minute to Australia, South Africa and the UK, B14/minute to New Zealand and B24/minute to Ireland. Many private international call offices (where your call is timed and you pay at the end) in tourist areas such as Bangkok's Thanon Khao San now use VOIP to access these rates – plus a service charge to the customer, of course.

International dialling codes

Calling from abroad, the international **country code** for Thailand is ⓣ**66**, after which you leave off the initial zero of the Thai number.

Calling from Thailand, for Burma, Cambodia, Laos or Malaysia dial ⓣ007 then the subscriber number, or for cheap-rate calls to Malaysia ⓣ002 then the subscriber number. For anywhere else, dial ⓣ001 or ⓣ009 (see p.80) and then the relevant country code:

Australia ⓣ61
Canada ⓣ1
Ireland ⓣ353
New Zealand ⓣ64
South Africa ⓣ27
UK ⓣ44
US ⓣ1

For **international directory enquiries** and operator services, call ⓣ100.

Photography

Most towns and all resorts have at least one **camera shop** where you will be able to download digital pictures on to a CD for B100–150 per CD. They all have card readers so there's no need to bring cables. In tourist centres many Internet cafés also offer CD-burning services, though if you want to email your pictures bringing your own cable will make life easier. For expert advice on digital image storage while travelling see ⓦadrianwarren.com.

Radio

Thailand boasts over five hundred **radio stations**, mostly music-oriented, ranging from Virgin Radio's Eazy (105.5 FM), which serves up Western pop, to Fat Radio, which plays Thai Indie sounds (104.5 FM). At the opposite end of the taste spectrum, Chulalongkorn University Radio (101.5 FM) plays classical music from 9.30pm to midnight every night. Meanwhile, the government-controlled Radio Thailand broadcasts news in English on 95.5 FM and 105 FM every day at 7am, noon and 7pm.

With a shortwave **radio** – or by going **online** – you can pick up the BBC World Service (ⓦwww.bbcworldservice.com), Radio Australia (ⓦwww.abc.net.au/ra), Voice of America (ⓦwww.voa.gov), Radio Canada (ⓦwww.rcinet.ca) and other international stations right across Thailand. Times and wavelengths change often, so get hold of a recent schedule just before you travel or consult the websites for frequency and programme guides.

Tampons

Few Thai women use **tampons**, which are not widely available, except from branches of Boots in Bangkok and the resorts, and from a few tourist-oriented minimarkets in the biggest resorts.

Television

There are five government-controlled **TV channels** in Thailand: channels 3, 5, 7 and 9 transmit a blend of news, documentaries, soaps, talk and quiz shows, while the more serious-minded 11 is a public-service channel, owned and operated by the government's public relations department. ITV is the only supposedly independent channel, owned and operated by Shin Corp, a communications conglomerate that was founded by Thaksin Shinawatra, but was recently sold, under controversial circumstances, to Temasek Holdings of Singapore; what effect, if any, this will have on editorial policy is unclear. **Cable** networks – available in many mid-range and most upmarket hotel rooms – carry channels from all around the world, including CNN from the US, BBC World from the UK, ABC from Australia, English-language movie channels, MTV and various sports and documentary channels. Both the *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation* print the daily TV and cable **schedule**.

Time

Bangkok is seven hours ahead of GMT, twelve hours ahead of US Eastern Standard Time and three hours behind Australian Eastern Standard Time.

Tourist information

The **Tourism Authority of Thailand**, or **TAT** (ⓦwww.tourismthailand.org) maintains offices in several cities abroad and has 24 branches within Thailand (all open daily 8.30am–4.30pm, though a few close noon–1pm for lunch). Regional offices should have up-to-date information on local festival dates and transport schedules, but none of them offers accommodation booking, and service can be variable. You can contact the TAT tourist assistance phoneline from anywhere in the country for free on ⓣ1672 (daily 8am–8pm). In Bangkok, TAT plays second fiddle to the Bangkok Tourist Bureau, details of which can be found on p.97. In some smaller towns that don't qualify for a local TAT office, the information gap is filled by a **municipal tourist assistance office**, though at some of these you may find it hard to locate a fluent English speaker.

TAT offices abroad

Australia and New Zealand Level 2, 75 Pitt St, Sydney, NSW 2000 ⓣ02/9247 7549, ⓦwww.thailand.net.au.
South Africa Contact the UK office.
UK and Ireland 3rd Floor, Brook House, 98–99 Jermyn St, London SW1Y 6EE ⓣ020/7925 2511, recorded information on ⓣ0870/900 2007, ⓦwww.thaismile.co.uk.
US and Canada 61 Broadway, Suite 2810, New York, NY 10006 ⓣ212/432-0433, ⓔinfo@tatny.com; 611 North Larchmont Blvd, 1st Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90004 ⓣ323/461-9814, ⓔtatla@ix.netcom.com.

Tipping

It is usual to **tip** hotel bellboys and porters B20, and to round up taxi fares to the nearest B10. Most guides, drivers, masseurs, waiters and maids also depend on tips, and although some upmarket hotels and restaurants will add an automatic ten percent service charge to your bill, this is not always shared out.

Travellers with disabilities

Thailand makes few provisions for its disabled citizens and this obviously affects **travellers with disabilities**, but taxis, comfortable hotels and personal tour guides are all more affordable than in the West and most travellers with disabilities find Thais only too happy to offer assistance where they can. Hiring a local tour guide to accompany you on a day's sightseeing is particularly recommended: government tour guides can be arranged through any TAT office.

Most **wheelchair-users** end up driving on the roads because it's too hard to negotiate the uneven pavements, which are high to allow for flooding and invariably lack dropped kerbs. Crossing the road can be a trial, particularly in Bangkok and other big cities, where it's usually a question of climbing steps up to a bridge rather than taking a ramped underpass. Few buses and trains have ramps but in Bangkok some Skytrain stations and all subway stations have lifts.

Several **tour companies** in Thailand specialize in organizing trips featuring adapted facilities, accessible transport and escorts. The Pattaya-based Adventure Holidays Thailand (ⓣ038 233502, ⓦwww.adventure-holidays-thailand.com) has a reputation for its can-do attitude to travel for disabled and physically challenged people and its tailor-made tours of Thailand can be designed to include elephant-riding and rafting as well as more traditional sightseeing. The Bangkok-based Help and Care Travel Company (ⓣ02 720 5395, ⓦwww.wheelchairtours.com), which designs accessible holidays in Thailand for slow walkers and wheelchair users, can provide transport and escort services; its website carries a (short) list of wheelchair-accessible hotels in the main tourist centres. Mermaid's Dive Centre in Pattaya (ⓣ038 232219, ⓦwww.learn-in-asia.com/handicapped_diving.htm; see p.209) runs International Association of Handicapped Divers programmes for **disabled divers** and instructors.

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Bangkok

BANGKOK
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CHAPTER 1

Highlights

✱ **The Grand Palace** The country's least missable sight, incorporating its holiest and most dazzling temple, Wat Phra Kaeo. See p.125

✱ **Wat Pho** Admire the Reclining Buddha and the lavish architecture, and leave time for a relaxing massage. See p.130

✱ **The National Museum** The central repository of the country's artistic riches. See p.134

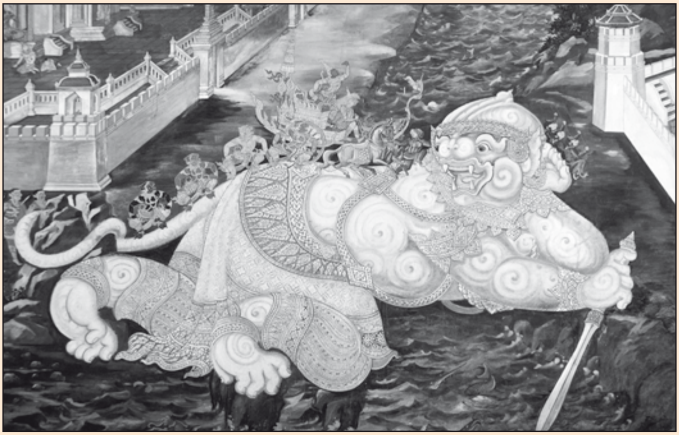
✱ **Chinatown** Kilometre-long alleyway markets, and the world's largest solid-gold Buddha. See p.139

✱ **The canals of Thonburi** See the Bangkok of yesteryear on a touristy but memorable longtail boat ride. See p.145

✱ **Jim Thompson's House** An elegant Thai design classic. See p.152

✱ **Chatuchak Weekend Market** Eight thousand stalls selling everything from triangular pillows to second-hand Levis. See p.159

✱ **Thai boxing** Nightly bouts at the national stadia, complete with live musical accompaniment and frenetic betting. See p.177



△ Ramayana mural, Wat Phra Kaeo, the Grand Palace

1

Bangkok

The headlong pace and flawed modernity of Bangkok match few people's visions of the capital of exotic Siam. Spiked with scores of high-rise buildings of concrete and glass, it's a vast flatness that holds a population of at least nine million, and feels even bigger. But under the shadow of the skyscrapers you'll find a heady mix of chaos and refinement, of frenetic markets and hushed golden temples, of dispiriting, zombie-like sex shows and early-morning alms-giving ceremonies. One way or another, the place will probably get under your skin – and if you don't enjoy the challenge of slogging through jams of buses and tuk-tuks, which fill the air with a chainsaw drone and clouds of pollution, you can spend a couple of days on the most impressive temples and museums, have a quick shopping spree and then strike out for the provinces.

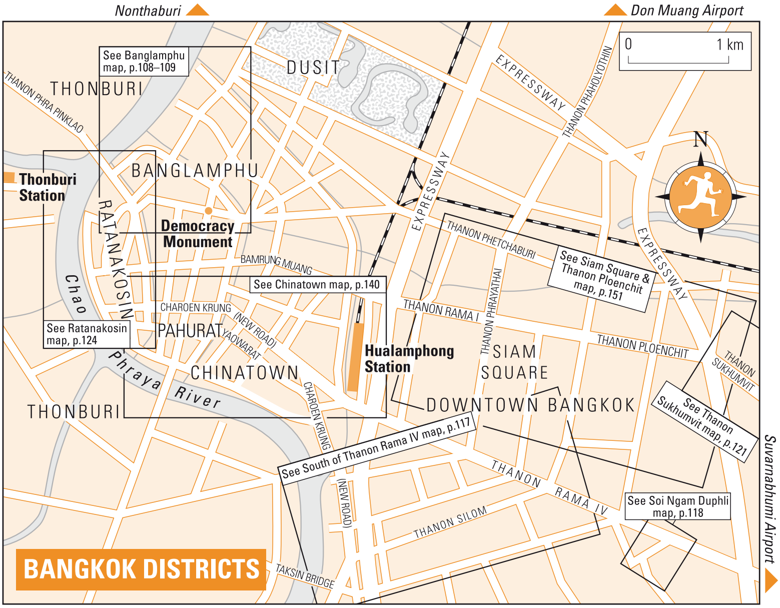
Most budget travellers head for the **Banglamphu** district, where if you're not careful you could end up watching DVDs all day long and selling your shoes when you run out of money. The district is far from having a monopoly on Bangkok accommodation, but it does have the advantage of being just a short walk from the major sights in the **Ratanakosin** area: the dazzling ostentation of the **Grand Palace** and **Wat Phra Kaeo**, lively and grandiose **Wat Pho** and the **National Museum**'s hoard of exquisite works of art. Once those cultural essentials have been seen, you can choose from a whole bevy of lesser sights, including **Wat Benjamabophit** (the "Marble Temple"), especially at festival time, and **Jim Thompson's House**, a small, personal museum of Thai design.

For livelier scenes, explore the dark alleys of **Chinatown's** bazaars or head for the water: the great **Chao Phraya River**, which breaks up and adds zest to the city's landscape, is the backbone of a network of **canals** that remains fundamentally intact in the west-bank Thonburi district. Inevitably the waterways have earned Bangkok the title of "Venice of the East", a tag that seems all too apt when you're wading through flooded streets in the rainy season; indeed, the city is year by year subsiding into the marshy ground, literally sinking under the weight of its burgeoning concrete towers.

Shopping on dry land varies from touristic outlets pushing silks, handicrafts and counterfeit watches, through home-grown boutiques selling street-wise fashions and stunning contemporary decor, to thronging local markets where half the fun is watching the crowds. Similarly, the city offers the country's most varied **entertainment**, ranging from traditional dancing and the orchestrated bedlam of Thai boxing, through hip bars and clubs playing the latest imported sounds, to the farang-only sex bars of the notorious Patpong district, a tinseltown Babylon that's the tip of a dangerous iceberg.

City of angels

When Rama I was crowned in 1782, he gave his new capital a grand 43-syllable name to match his ambitious plans for the building of the city. Since then, 21 more syllables have been added. Krungthepmahanakhornbowornrattanakosinmahintarayutthayamahadilokpopnopparatratchathaniburiromudomratchaniwetmahasathanamornpimanavatarnsathitsakkathattiyavisnukarprasit is certified by the Guinness Book of Records as the longest place name in the world, roughly translating as “Great city of angels, the supreme repository of divine jewels, the great land unconquerable, the grand and prominent realm, the royal and delightful capital city full of nine noble gems, the highest royal dwelling and grand palace, the divine shelter and living place of the reincarnated spirits”. Fortunately, all Thais refer to the city simply as **Krung Thep**, “City of Angels”, though plenty can recite the full name at the drop of a hat. **Bangkok** – “Village of the Plum Olive” – was the name of the original village on the Thonburi side; with remarkable persistence, it has remained in use by foreigners since the time of the French garrison.


Nonthaburi
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See Banglamphu map, p.108–109
DUSIT
THONBURI
THANON PHRA PINKLAO
EXPRESSWAY
THANON PHAHOLYOTHIN
BANGLAMPHU
Thonburi Station
Democracy Monument
RATANAKOSIN
EXPRESSWAY
THANON PHETCHABURI
See Siam Square & Thanon Ploenchit map, p.151
EXPRESSWAY
BAMRUNG MUANG
See Chinatown map, p.140
Chao Phraya River
CHAROEN KRUNG
THANON RAMA I
See Ratanakosin map, p.124
PAHURAT
(NEW ROAD)
YAOWARAT
THANON PHRAYATHAI
THANON PLOENCHIT
Hualamphong Station
SIAM SQUARE
THANON SUKHUMVIT
CHINATOWN
THONBURI
CHAROEN KRUNG
DOWNTOWN BANGKOK
See Thanon Sukhumvit map, p.121
See South of Thanon Rama IV map, p.117
THANON RAMA IV
(NEW ROAD)
See Soi Ngam Duphli map, p.118
THANON SILOM
Suvarnabhumi Airport
TAKSIN BRIDGE

BANGKOK DISTRICTS

Arrival, information, transport and accommodation

Finding a place to stay in Bangkok is usually no problem: the city has a huge range of **accommodation**, from the murkiest backstreet bunk to the plushest five-star riverside suite, and you don't have to spend a lot to get a comfortable place. Getting to your guest house or hotel, however, is unlikely to put you in a good mood, for there can be few cities in the world where **transport** is such a headache. Bumper-to-bumper vehicles create fumes so bad that some days the city's carbon monoxide emissions come close to the international danger level, and it's not unusual for residents to spend three hours getting to work – and these are people who know where they're going. However, the recent openings of the subway system and the elevated train network called the Bangkok Transit System, or BTS Skytrain, have radically improved public transport in downtown areas of the city. Unfortunately for tourists, these systems do not stretch as far as Ratanakosin or Banglamphu, where boats still provide the fastest means of hopping from one sight to another.

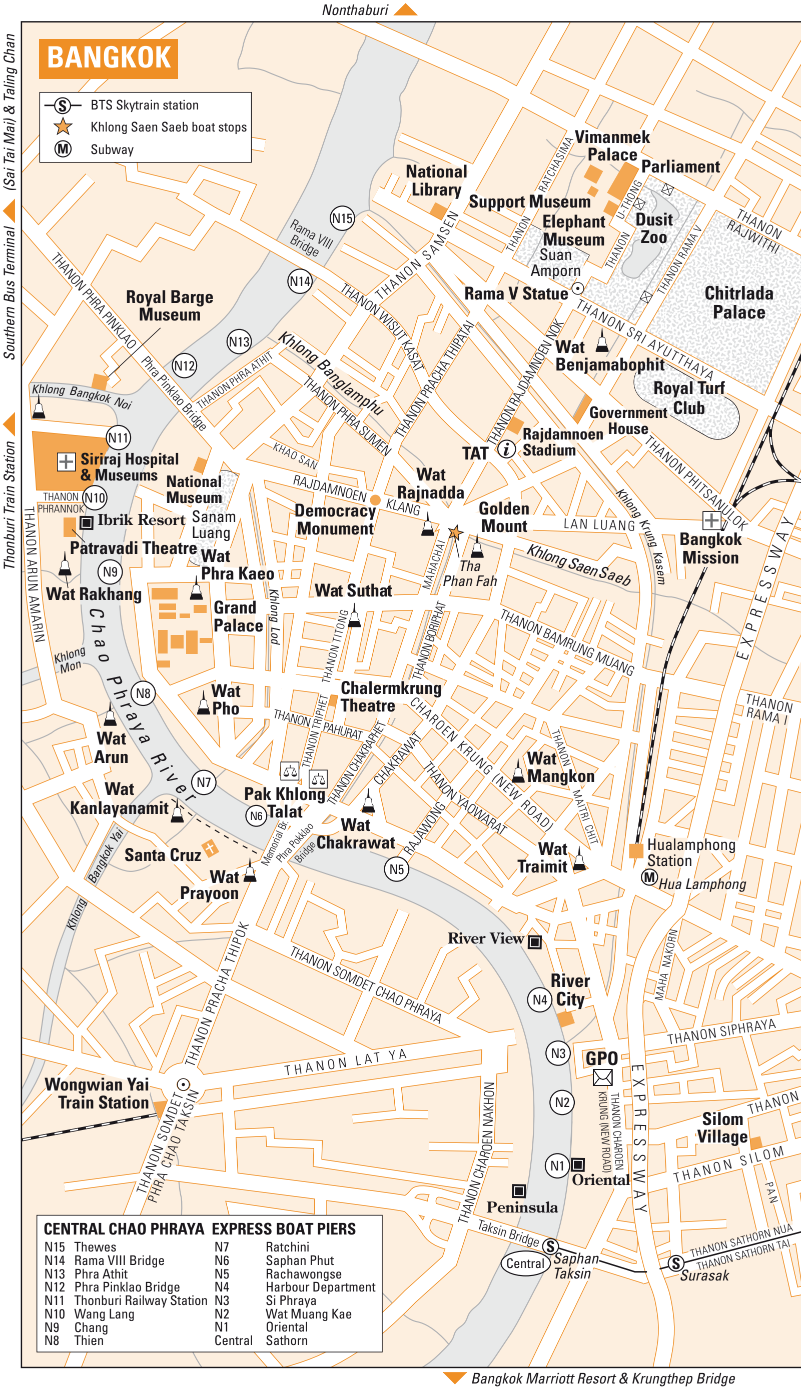
Arriving in Bangkok

Unless you arrive in Bangkok by train, be prepared for a long slog into the centre. Both the old airport at Don Muang and its brand-new replacement, Suvarnabhumi Airport, are a slow 25km from the city centre. Even if you arrive by coach, you'll still have a lot of work to do to get into the centre.

By air: Suvarnabhumi Airport

At the time of going to press, the new **Suvarnabhumi Airport** (pronounced "soo-wanna-poom"; Ⓦwww.suvarnabhumiairport.com, or go to Ⓦwww.2bangkok.com or Ⓦwww.bangkokairportonline.com for the latest news) had just opened, 25km east of central Bangkok off the main Bang Na–Trat highway towards Chonburi, at inauspiciously named Nong Ngu Hao (meaning "cobra swamp"). It is slated to handle all scheduled flights (international and domestic), while the old Don Muang Airport may continue handling charter airlines. Suvarnabhumi is the largest airport in Southeast Asia, capable of handling 76 flights an hour; it's also said to have the world's largest single terminal building, which serves passengers on both international and domestic flights, as well as the tallest control tower.

Facilities at Suvarnabhumi include tourist information and accommodation-booking desks in the Arrivals hall, plenty of cafés and restaurants (on Level 6), two 24-hour clinics, a spa and an airport hotel. Left-luggage storage is located between the international and domestic arrivals areas and charges B100 per 24hr; it's open 24 hours. However, some of Suvarnabhumi's facilities and transport connections are still a work in progress so some of the following transport information may change; check with the information desks at the airport for latest details.

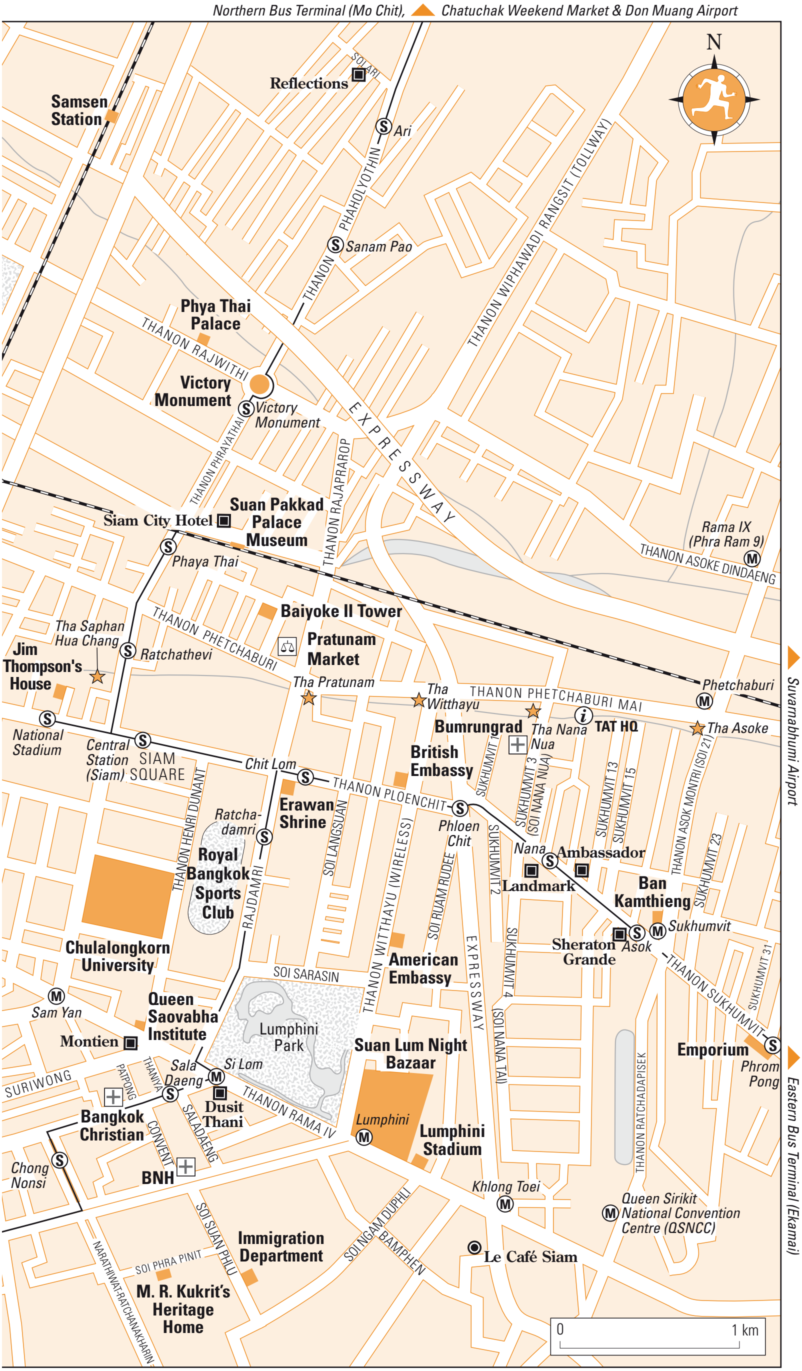


Nonthaburi
BANGKOK
Southern Bus Terminal (Sai Tai Mai) & Taling Chan
Thonburi Train Station
Bangkok Marriott Resort & Krungthep Bridge
National Library
Vimanmek Palace
Parliament
Support Museum
Elephant Museum
Suan Amporn
Dusit Zoo
Chitrlada Palace
THANON RAJWITHI
RATCHASIMA
U-THONG
THANON
THANON
THANON RAMA V
Rama V Statue
THANON SAMSEN
Rama VIII Bridge
N15
N14
N13
N12
N11
N10
N9
N8
N7
N6
N5
N4
N3
N2
N1
THANON WISUT KASAT
THANON SRI AYUTTHAYA
Wat Benjamabophit
Royal Turf Club
Government House
THANON PHITSANULOK
Royal Barge Museum
THANON PHRA PINKLAO
Phra Pinklao Bridge
THANON PHRA ATHIT
Khlong Banglamphu
THANON PHRA SUMEN
THANON PRACHA THIPATAI
THANON RAJDAMNOEN NOK
Rajdamnoen Stadium
TAT
Khlong Bangkok Noi
Siriraj Hospital & Museums
THANON PHRANNOK
National Museum
KHAO SAN
RAJDAMNOEN KLANG
Wat Rajnadda
Golden Mount
LAN LUANG
Khlong Krung Kasem
Bangkok Mission
Democracy Monument
Ibrik Resort
Sanam Luang
Patravadi Theatre
Wat Phra Kaeo
MAHACHAI
Tha Phan Fah
Khlong Saen Saeb
EXPRESSWAY
THANON ARUN AMARIN
Wat Rakhang
Grand Palace
Khlong Lod
Wat Suthat
THANON TITONG
THANON BORIPHAT
THANON BAMRUNG MUANG
Khlong Mon
Chao Phraya River
Wat Pho
Chalermkrung Theatre
THANON RAMA I
Wat Arun
THANON TRIPHET
THANON PAHURAT
THANON CHAKRAPHET
CHAKRAWAT
CHAROEN KRUNG (NEW ROAD)
THANON YAOWARAT
THANON MAITRI CHIT
Wat Mangkon
Wat Kanlayanamit
Pak Khlong Talat
Memorial Br.
Phra Pokklao Bridge
Wat Chakrawat
RAJAWONG
Wat Traimit
Hualamphong Station
Hua Lamphong
Bangkok Yai
Santa Cruz
Wat Prayoon
Khlong
River View
MAHA NAKORN
River City
THANON PRACHA THIPOK
THANON SOMDET CHAO PHRAYA
THANON SIPHRAYA
GPO
THANON LAT YA
Wongwian Yai Train Station
THANON SOMDET PHRA CHAO TAKSIN
THANON CHAROEN NAKHON
THANON CHAROEN KRUNG (NEW ROAD)
Silom Village
THANON SILOM
PAN
Oriental
Peninsula
Taksin Bridge
Central
Saphan Taksin
THANON SATHORN NUA
THANON SATHORN TAI
Surasak
S
S

- Ⓢ BTS Skytrain station
- ☆ Khlong Saen Saeb boat stops
- Ⓜ Subway

CENTRAL CHAO PHRAYA EXPRESS BOAT PIERS

N15	Thewes	N7	Ratchini
N14	Rama VIII Bridge	N6	Saphan Phut
N13	Phra Athit	N5	Rachawongse
N12	Phra Pinklao Bridge	N4	Harbour Department
N11	Thonburi Railway Station	N3	Si Phraya
N10	Wang Lang	N2	Wat Muang Kae
N9	Chang	N1	Oriental
N8	Thien	Central	Sathorn


Northern Bus Terminal (Mo Chit), Chatuchak Weekend Market & Don Muang Airport
N
Samsen Station
Reflections
SOI ARI
Ari
THANON PHAHOLYOTHIN
Sanam Pao
THANON WIPHAWADI RANGSIT (TOLLWAY)
Phya Thai Palace
THANON RAJWITHI
Victory Monument
Victory Monument
THANON PHRAYATHAI
EXPRESSWAY
THANON RAJAPRAROP
Suan Pakkad Palace Museum
Siam City Hotel
Phaya Thai
Rama IX (Phra Ram 9)
THANON ASOKE DINDAENG
Baiyoke II Tower
THANON PETCHABURI
Pratunam Market
Tha Saphan Hua Chang
Ratchathevi
Jim Thompson's House
Tha Pratunam
Tha Witthayu
THANON PHETCHABURI MAI
Phetchaburi
National Stadium
Central Station (Siam)
SIAM SQUARE
Chit Lom
Bumrungrad
Tha Nana Nua
TAT HQ
Tha Asoke
British Embassy
SUKHUMVIT 1
SUKHUMVIT 3 (SOI NANA NUA)
SUKHUMVIT 13
SUKHUMVIT 15
THANON ASOK MONTRI (SOI 21)
THANON PLOENCHIT
Erawan Shrine
THANON HENRI DUNANT
Ratchadamri
Royal Bangkok Sports Club
SOI LANGSUAN
Phloen Chit
SOI RUAM RUDEE
SUKHUMVIT 2
Nana
Ambassador
Landmark
Ban Kamthieng
SUKHUMVIT 23
Sukhumvit
Asok
Sheraton Grande
THANON SUKHUMVIT
SUKHUMVIT 31
THANON RAJDAMRI
THANON WITTHAYU (WIRELESS)
American Embassy
SOI SARASIN
EXPRESSWAY
SUKHUMVIT 4 (SOI NANA TAI)
Chulalongkorn University
Sam Yan
Queen Saovabha Institute
Montien
Lumphini Park
Suan Lum Night Bazaar
Emporium
Phrom Pong
SURIWONG
PATPONG
THANIYA
Sala Daeng
Si Lom
Dusit Thani
THANON RAMA IV
THANON RATCHADAPISEK
Bangkok Christian
CONVENT
SALADAENG
Lumphini
Lumphini Stadium
Chong Nonsi
BNH
Khlong Toei
Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre (QSNCC)
SOI SUAN PHLU
Immigration Department
SOI NGAM DUPHLI
BAMPHEN
Le Café Siam
SOI PHRA PINIT
M. R. Kukrit's Heritage Home
NARATHIWAT-RATCHANAKHARIN
0
1 km
Suvarnabhumi Airport
Eastern Bus Terminal (Ekamai)

Getting into town from Suvarnabhumi

Unless you're already counting your baht, the best way of getting into the city is probably by air-conditioned **Airport Express bus** (frequent departures; B150). These buses depart from outside the Arrivals hall on Level 2 and serve four main areas of the city: route AE1 goes to Thanon Silom (via expressway); route AE2 serves Banglamphu (via expressway); route AE3 runs the length of Thanon Sukhumvit; and route AE4 heads for Hualamphong train station (via expressway). Note that the Airport Express buses will probably be less reliable for **departures** to Suvarnabhumi, as the Bangkok traffic will make it difficult for them to stick to their schedules; instead, you'll probably be better off using the private minibuses to Suvarnabhumi arranged by travel agents, guest houses and hotels, especially in Banglamphu, with pick-ups from your accommodation.

Airport limousines for four to eight passengers also depart from outside the Arrivals hall on Level 2 and should be arranged through the dedicated counter in the Arrivals hall; a limousine to Pattaya costs from B1500. To catch a **metered taxi**, however, you may need to go to levels 4 or 1; in addition to the standard meter rate for all Bangkok taxis (about B300 to Silom for example), you'll need to pay a B50 airport surcharge plus around B70 in tolls. Be sure to get a licensed metered taxi and to avoid any freelance unmetered taxi touts: see below for a warning about this.

For all other (cheaper) airport transport, particularly public buses, plus **rental car** pick-up, you need to first make your way from the passenger terminal to the main **transportation centre**, elsewhere in Suvarnabhumi's vast airport complex. This involves taking a free ten-minute ride on the "express route" shuttle bus from outside Arrivals (Level 2) or Departures (Level 4) to the transportation centre (be sure not to confuse this with the "ordinary route" shuttle bus, which ferries airport staff around the various buildings). At the transportation centre, you can catch **public buses** to the following destinations in and beyond the capital, though it is likely that more routes will be added in the future. Of these public buses currently running from Suvarnabhumi into Bangkok (all of which charge no more than B40), the most useful are: #552 to On Nut Skytrain station at the far eastern end of Thanon Sukhumvit; #551 to Victory Monument (via expressway); #554 to Don Muang Airport (via expressway); and #553 to Samut Prakan. A route to the Southern Bus Terminal is also on the cards. Longer-distance destinations are served by the Transport Company (aka Baw Khaw Saw; Ⓣ02 936 2841–8, Ⓦwww.transport.co.th/eng/homeenglish.htm) who run inter-provincial **air-con buses** direct from Suvarnabhumi Airport to Pattaya and Trat on the east coast, as well as to Nong Khai; further routes may also appear.

If you're aiming to get into town by **public taxi** from the transportation centre, avoid any tout who may offer a cheap ride in an unlicensed and unmetered vehicle, as newly arrived travellers are seen as easy prey for robbery, and the cabs are untraceable; instead take a metered, air-conditioned cab (with a distinctive "TAXI METER" sign on top).

Airport transport should become a lot less complicated when the planned high-speed **rail** link is completed (possibly in 2008). This will run to Phaya Thai Skytrain station in downtown Bangkok (connected to Phetchaburi subway station).

Airport accommodation at and around Suvarnabhumi

There is one **airport hotel** on site at Suvarnabhumi, a three-minute walk from the main passenger terminal, via a walkway. This is the *Novotel Suvarnabhumi* (Ⓣ02 131 1111, Ⓦwww.accorhotels.com; ⑨), which offers Thai, Japanese and international restaurants, a swimming pool, health spa and fitness centre, plus kids' play area and babysitting services.

Otherwise, the closest accommodation options are some 15km from the airport, on the far eastern edge of Bangkok: in **Bang Na** and around **Sukhumvit sois 71 and 77**. These include *Hotel Ibis Huamark Bangkok* at 7 Soi Ramkamhaeng 15, off Thanon Ramkamhaeng (Ⓣ02 308 7888, Ⓦwww.ibishotel.com; ⑥); *Avana Hotel* at 23/1 Soi 14/1, Thanon Bang Na–Trad (Ⓣ02 744 4280, Ⓦwww.avanahotel.com; ⑧); and *Royal Princess Srinakarin* at 905 Thanon Srinakarin (Ⓣ02 721 8400, Ⓦbangkok-srinakarin.royalprincess.com; ⑧).

Don Muang Airport

Should you find yourself having to use **Don Muang Airport**, probably for a charter flight, you will find the most economical way of getting into the city is by **public bus**. The bus stop is outside the northern end of Arrivals on the main highway; see the box on p.100 for the most useful routes. The **train** to Hualamphong Station (see below) is the quickest way into town, but services are irregular (50min; B5–30); follow the signs from Arrivals in Terminal 1. Licensed and metered public **taxis** are operated from clearly signposted counters, run by the Airports Authority of Thailand, outside Arrivals; avoid taxi touts and unmetered taxis, as described above.

The *Amari Airport Hotel* (Ⓣ02 566 1020–1, Ⓦwww.amari.com; ⑨), just across the road from Don Muang's international terminals, rents out upmarket **hotel** bedrooms at special daytime rates between 8am and 6pm (from US$39 for 3hr). Far cheaper is the *We-Train International House*, about 3km west of the airport (Ⓣ02 967 8550–4, Ⓦwww.we-train.co.th; ③), run by the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, where proceeds go to help disadvantaged women and children. In a peaceful lakeside setting, there are dorms (from B100), comfortable air-conditioned rooms and a swimming pool. To get there, take a taxi from Don Muang airport, or a taxi or motorbike from Don Muang train station (saving the B50 airport pick-up fee); if in doubt, phone the guest house who will book a taxi to come and pick you up.

By train

Travelling to Bangkok by **train** from Malaysia and most parts of Thailand, you arrive at **Hualamphong Station**, which is centrally located, at the southern end of the subway line. The most useful of the numerous city buses serving Hualamphong are #53 (non-air-con), which stops on the east side (left-hand exit) of the station and runs to the budget accommodation in Banglamphu; and the #25 (ordinary and air-con), which runs east to Siam Square and along Thanon Sukhumvit to the Eastern Bus Terminal, or west through Chinatown to Tha Chang (for the Grand Palace). See box on p.100 for bus-route details. Station **facilities** include a post office, an exchange booth, several ATMs, an Internet centre and a **left-luggage** office (daily 4am–11pm), which charges B20–30 per day, depending on the size of the bag (almost any rucksack counts as large). A more economical place to store baggage is at the *TT2 Guest House* (see p.114), about fifteen minutes' walk from the station, which provides the same service for only B10 per item per day, whatever the size.

One service the station does not provide is itinerant tourist assistance staff – anyone who comes up to you in or around the station concourse and offers help/information/transport or ticket-booking services is almost certainly a **con-artist**, however many official-looking ID tags are hanging round their neck. This is a well-established scam to fleece new arrivals and should be avoided at all costs (see p.70 for more details). For train-related questions, contact the 24-hour "Information" counter close by the departures board (there's more information on buying onward rail tickets on p.185). The station area is also fertile ground for **dishonest tuk-tuk drivers**, so you'll need to be extra suspicious to avoid them – take a metered taxi or public transport instead.

One or two slow trains from the south pull in at the small and not very busy **Thonburi Station**, from where it's a short ride in a red public songthaew or an 850-metre walk east to the N11 (Bangkok Noi) express-boat stop, just across the Chao Phraya River from Banglamphu and Ratanakosin.

By bus

Buses come to a halt at a number of far-flung spots. All services from the north and northeast terminate at the **Northern Bus Terminal** (**Mo Chit**) on Thanon Kamphaeng Phet 2; some east-coast buses also use Mo Chit (rather than the Eastern Terminal), including several daily services from Pattaya, Rayong (for Ko Samet), Chanthaburi and Trat (for Ko Chang and the Cambodian border). The quickest way to get into the city centre from Mo Chit is to hop onto the Skytrain (see p.104) at the Mo Chit Station, or the subway at the adjacent Chatuchak Park Station (see p.105), fifteen minutes' walk from the bus terminal on Thanon Phaholyothin, and then change onto a city bus if necessary. Otherwise, it's a long bus or taxi ride into town: city buses from the Northern Bus Terminal include ordinary #159 to Siam Square, Hualamphong Station, Banglamphu and the Southern Bus Terminal; and ordinary and air-conditioned #3, and air-conditioned #509 and #512 to Banglamphu; for details of these routes see the box on pp.100–01.

Most buses from the east coast use the **Eastern Bus Terminal** (**Ekamai**) between sois 40 and 42 on Thanon Sukhumvit. This bus station is right beside the Ekamai Skytrain stop (see p.105), and is also served by lots of city buses, including air-conditioned #511 to Banglamphu and the Southern Bus Terminal (see box on pp.100–01 for details), or you can take a taxi down Soi 63 to Tha Ekamai, a pier on Khlong Saen Saeb, to pick up the canal boat service to the Golden Mount near Banglamphu (see p.102). There's a left-luggage booth at the bus terminal (daily 8am–6pm; B30/day).

Bus services from Malaysia and the south, as well as from Kanchanaburi, use the **Southern Bus Terminal** (**Sai Tai Mai**) at the junction of Thanon Borom Ratchonni and the Nakhon Chaisri Highway, west of the Chao Phraya River in Thonburi. Drivers on these services always make a stop to drop passengers on the east side of Thanon Borom Ratchonni, in front of a Toyota dealer, before doing a time-consuming U-turn for the terminus on the west side of the road; if you're heading across the river to Banglamphu or downtown Bangkok you should get off here, along with the majority of the other passengers. Numerous **city buses** cross the river from this bus stop, including air-con #507 to Banglamphu, Hualamphong Station and Thanon Rama IV, air-con #511 to Banglamphu and Thanon Sukhumvit, and non-air-con #159 to the Northern Bus Terminal (see box on pp.100–01 for routes). This is also a better place to grab a **taxi** into town, as rides are faster and cheaper when started from here.

Orientation and information

Bangkok can be a tricky place to get your bearings as it's huge and ridiculously congested, with largely featureless modern buildings and no obvious centre. The boldest line on the map is the **Chao Phraya River**, which divides the city into Bangkok proper on the east bank, and **Thonburi**, part of Greater Bangkok, on the west.

The historical core of Bangkok proper, site of the original royal palace, is **Ratanakosin**, which nestles into a bend in the river. Three concentric canals radiate eastwards around Ratanakosin: the southern part of the area between the canals is the old-style trading enclave of **Chinatown** and Indian **Pahurat**, linked to the old palace by Thanon Charoen Krung (aka New Road); the northern part is characterized by old temples and the **Democracy Monument**, west of which is the backpackers' ghetto of **Banglamphu**. Beyond the canals to the north, **Dusit** is the site of many government buildings and the nineteenth-century Vimanmek Palace, and is linked to Ratanakosin by the three stately avenues, Thanon Rajdamnoen Nok, Thanon Rajdamnoen Klang and Thanon Rajdamnoen Nai.

"New" Bangkok begins to the east of the canals and beyond the main rail line and Hualamphong Station, and stretches as far as the eye can see to the east and north. The main business district and most of the embassies are south of **Thanon Rama IV**, with the port of Khlong Toey at the southern edge. The diverse area north of Thanon Rama IV includes the sprawling campus of Chulalongkorn University, huge shopping centres around **Siam Square** and a variety of other businesses. A couple of blocks northeast of Siam Square stands the tallest building in Bangkok, the 84-storeyed **Baiyoke II Tower**, whose golden spire makes a good point of reference. To the east lies the swish residential quarter off **Thanon Sukhumvit**.

Information and maps

The official source of information on the capital is the Bangkok Tourist Bureau (BTB). Its main office is at the **Bangkok Information Centre**, next to Phra Pinklao Bridge at 17/1 Thanon Phra Athit in Banglamphu (daily 9am–7pm; Ⓣ02 225 7612–4, Ⓦwww.bangkoktourist.com), and this is supported by 27 strategically placed satellite booths around the capital (daily 9am–5pm), including in front of the Grand Palace, at the Erawan Shrine, at River City and Mah Boon Krong shopping centres, in front of Robinson Department Store on Thanon Silom, and in front of Banglamphu's Wat Chana Songkhram.

For advice on destinations further afield you need to visit the **Tourism Authority of Thailand** (**TAT**) which maintains a Tourist Service Centre within walking distance of Banglamphu, at 4 Rajdamnoen Nok (daily 8.30am–4.30pm; Ⓣ02 283 1500, freephone tourist assistance 8am–8pm Ⓣ1672, Ⓦwww.tourismthailand.org), a twenty-minute stroll from Thanon Khao San, or a short ride in air-conditioned bus #503. TAT also has a couple of booths in the airport arrivals concourse (daily 8am–midnight), but its headquarters (daily 8.30am–4.30pm; Ⓣ02 250 5500) is rather inconveniently located out at 1600 Thanon Phetchaburi Mai, 350m west of the junction with Sukhumvit Soi 21 and the Phetchaburi subway stop, or 150m east of the junction with Sukhumvit Soi 3 and Tha Nana Nua on the Khlong Saen Saeb canal boat service (see the Thanon Sukhumvit map on p.121). Note, however, that the many other shops and offices across the capital displaying signs announcing "TAT Tourist Information" or similar are **not official Tourism Authority of Thailand centres** and will not be dispensing impartial advice: the Tourism Authority of Thailand never uses the acronym TAT on its office-fronts or in its logo. Other useful sources of information, especially about what to avoid, are the travellers' **noticeboards** in some Banglamphu guest houses – and from other travellers themselves.

The monthly expats-oriented **listings magazine** *Metro* (B100) details upcoming art exhibitions and gigs and includes useful sections on restaurants, cinemas, nightlife and gay life. The backpackers' monthly, *Untamed Travel* (B120), is more hip and straight-talking and though it doesn't carry events listings it does review some guest houses, bars, clubs, restaurants and sights in Bangkok as well as in the rest of the country and other Southeast Asian destinations. Both magazines are sold at bookstores, hotel shops and 7–11 stores.

To get around Bangkok on the cheap, you'll need to buy a **bus map**. Of the several available at bookshops, hotels and some guest houses, the most useful is Bangkok Guide's *Bus Routes & Map*, which not only maps all major air-conditioned and non-air-conditioned bus routes but also carries detailed written itineraries of some two hundred bus routes. The long-running bright blue and yellow bus map published by Tour 'n' Guide also maps bus routes and dozens of smaller sois, but its street locations are not always reliable, and it can be hard to decipher exact bus routings. The bus routes on *Litehart's Groovy Map and Guide* are clearly colour-coded but only selected ones are given. Serious shoppers will want to buy a copy of the idiosyncratic *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok*, which has lots of annotated recommendations on shops, markets and interesting neighbourhoods across the city and is reliably accurate; it's available in most tourist areas and from Ⓦwww.nancychandler.net.

City transport

The main form of transport in the city is **buses**, and once you've mastered the labyrinthine complexity of the route maps you'll be able to get to any part of the city, albeit slowly. Catching the various kinds of **taxi** is more expensive, and you'll still get held up by the daytime traffic jams. **Boats** are obviously more limited in their range, but they're regular and as cheap as buses, and you'll save a lot of time by using them whenever possible – a journey between Banglamphu and the GPO, for instance, will

Tours of the city

If you can't face negotiating the public transport network, any taxi or tuk-tuk driver can be hired for the day to take you around the major or minor sights (B700–800), and every travel agent in the city can arrange this for you as well; read the advice on avoiding tuk-tuk tout scams on p.106 first. Alternatively, the Bangkok Tourist Bureau (BTB; see p.97) runs occasional **tours of the capital**, including a night-time bicycle tour of Ratanakosin (Sat 6.30–9.30pm; minimum five people; B390 including bicycle), weekend walking tours according to demand (B100), and a tourist "tram" (more like an open-topped single-decker bus) which covers a forty-minute circuit from the Grand Palace down to Wat Pho, up to Banglamphu, and back to the palace, roughly every half an hour (daily 9.30am–5pm; B30). Real Asia (Ⓣ02 665 6364, Ⓦwww.realasia.net) does canal and walking tours through Thonburi and leads outings to the historic fishing port of Samut Sakhon (from B1800), and Tamarind Tours runs imaginative and well-regarded tours of the city and nearby provinces, including specialized options such as Bangkok X-Files and Bangkok After Dark (Ⓣ02 238 3227, Ⓦwww.tamarindtours.com; from US$59).

Unlikely as it sounds, there are several companies offering **cycle tours** of the city's outer neighbourhoods and beyond; these are an excellent way to gain a different perspective on Thai life and offer a unique chance to see traditional communities close up. The most popular, longest-running bicycle tour is the ABC Amazing Bangkok Cyclist Tour, which starts in the Thanon Sukhumvit area and takes you across the river to surprisingly rural khlong- and riverside communities; tours operate every day year-round, cover up to 30km depending on the itinerary, and need to be reserved in advance through Real Asia (Ⓣ02 665 6364, Ⓦwww.realasia.net; B1000–2000 including bicycle). Bangkok Bike Rides (Ⓣ02 712 5305 Ⓦwww.bangkokbikerides.com; $25–50 per person, minimum two people) also operates from the Sukhumvit area and runs a programme of different daily tours within Greater Bangkok as well as to the floating markets and canalside neighbourhoods of Damnoen Saduak and Samut Songkhram in the Central Plains. Grasshopper Adventures runs half-day cycle tours from Banglamphu around the sights of Ratanakosin (departs every Sun at 8am from the Viengtai Hotel on Thanon Ram Bhuttri; Ⓣ087 929 5208, Ⓦwww.grasshopperadventures.com; B800).

For details of Thonburi canal tours, see p.145 and for Chao Phraya Express tourist boats, see p.101.

take around thirty minutes by water, half what it would take on land. The **Skytrain** and **subway** each have a similarly limited range but are also worth using whenever suitable for all or part of your journey; their networks roughly coincide with each other at the east end of Thanon Silom, at the corner of Thanon Sukhumvit and Soi 21 (Thanon Asok Montri), and on Thanon Phaholyothin by Chatuchak Park (Mo Chit), while the Skytrain joins up with the Chao Phraya River express boats at the vital hub of Sathorn/Saphan Taksin (Taksin Bridge) and the subway intersects the mainline railway at Hualamphong and Bang Sue stations. **Walking** might often be quicker than travelling by road, but the heat can be unbearable, distances are always further than they look on the map, and the engine fumes are stifling.

Buses

Bangkok is served by over four hundred bus routes, reputedly the world's largest bus network, on which operate three main types of bus service. On **ordinary** (non-air-con) buses, which are either red and white, blue and white, or small and green, fares range from B6 to B9; most routes operate from about 4am to 10pm, but some maintain a 24-hour service, as noted in the box overleaf. **Air-conditioned** buses are either blue, orange or white (some are articulated) and charge between B12 and B24 according to distance travelled; most stop in the late evening, but a few of the more popular routes run 24-hour services. As buses can only go as fast as the car in front, which at the moment is averaging 4 kilometres per hour, you'll probably be spending a long time on each journey, so you'd be well advised to pay the extra for cool air – and the air-conditioned buses are usually less crowded, too. It's also possible to travel certain routes (until 9pm) on pink, air-conditioned private **microbuses**, which were designed with the commuter in mind and offer the certainty of a seat (no standing allowed). The fare is generally a flat B25 (exact money only), which is dropped into a box beside the driver's seat.

Some of the most useful city-bus routes are described in the box overleaf; for a comprehensive roundup of bus routes in the capital, buy a copy of Bangkok Guide's *Bus Routes & Map* (see p.97), or log onto the Bangkok Mass Transit Authority website (Ⓦwww.bmta.co.th), which gives details of all city-bus routes, bar microbuses and airport buses.

Boats

Bangkok was built as an amphibious city around a network of canals – or **khlongs** – and the first streets were constructed only in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many canals remain on the Thonburi side of the river, but most of those on the Bangkok side have been turned into roads. The Chao Phraya River itself is still a major transport route for residents and non-residents alike, forming more of a link than a barrier between the two halves of the city.

Express boats

The Chao Phraya Express Boat Company operates the vital **express-boat** (*reua duan*; Ⓦwww.chaophrayaboat.co.th) service, using large water buses to plough up and down the river, between clearly signed piers (*tha*), which appear on all Bangkok maps. Tha Sathorn, which gives access to the Skytrain network at Saphan Taksin Station, has been designated "Central Pier", with piers to the south of here numbered S1, S2, etc, those to the north N1, N2 and so on – the important stops in the centre of the city are outlined in the box on p.102 and marked on our city map (see p.92). Its basic route, one hour thirty minutes in total, runs between Wat Rajsingkorn, just upriver of Krung Thep Bridge, in the south, and Nonthaburi in the north. These **"standard"** boats set off every fifteen–twenty minutes between around 6am

Useful bus routes

For more details on Banglamphu bus stops and routes, see p.110.

#3 (ordinary and air-con, 24hr): Northern Bus Terminal–Chatuchak Weekend Market–Thanon Phaholyothin–Thanon Samsen–Thanon Phra Athit (for Banglamphu guest houses)–Thanon Sanam Chai–Thanon Triphet–Memorial Bridge (for Pak Khlong Talat)–Taksin Monument–Wat Suwan.

#15 (ordinary): Krung Thep Bridge–Thanon Charoen Krung–Thanon Silom–Thanon Rajdamri–Siam Square–Thanon Lan Luang–Sanam Luang–Thanon Phra Athit.

#16 (ordinary and air-con): Thanon Srinarong–Thanon Samsen–Thewes (for guest houses)–Thanon Phitsanulok–Thanon Phrayathai–Siam Square–Thanon Suriwong.

#25 (ordinary and air-con, 24hr): Eastern Bus Terminal–Thanon Sukhumvit–Siam Square–Hualamphong station–Thanon Yaowarat (for Chinatown)–Pahurat–Wat Pho–Tha Chang (for the Grand Palace). Note, however, that some #25 buses (ordinary only) only go as far as Hualamphong Station, and that during rush hours some #25s take the expressway, missing out Siam Square.

#29 (ordinary and air-con): Don Muang Airport–Chatuchak Weekend Market–Siam Square–Thanon Phrayathai–Thanon Rama IV–Hualamphong Station.

#38 (ordinary): Chatuchak Weekend Market–Victory Monument–Thanon Phrayathai–Thanon Phetchaburi–Thanon Asok Montri–Thanon Sukhumvit–Eastern Bus Terminal.

#39 (ordinary, 24hr): Chatuchak Weekend Market–Victory Monument–Thanon Phetchaburi–Thanon Lan Luang–Democracy Monument–Rajdamnoen Klang (for Thanon Khao San guest houses)–Sanam Luang. Note, however, that some #39 buses only run as far south as Victory Monument.

#53 circular (also anti-clockwise; ordinary): Thewes–Thanon Krung Kasem–Hualamphong Station–Thanon Yaowarat–Pahurat–Pak Khlong Talat–Thanon Maharat (for Wat Pho, the Grand Palace and Wat Mahathat)–Sanam Luang (for National Museum)–Thanon Phra Athit and Thanon Samsen (for Banglamphu guest houses)–Thewes.

#56 circular (also clockwise; ordinary): Thanon Phra Sumen–Wat Bowoniwes–Thanon Pracha Thipatai–Thanon Ratchasima (for Vimanmek Palace)–Thanon Rajwithi–Krung Thon Bridge–Thonburi–Phrapokklao Bridge–Thanon Chakraphet (for Chinatown)–Thanon Mahachai–Democracy Monument–Thanon Tanao (for Khao San guest houses)–Thanon Phra Sumen.

#59 (ordinary and air-con, 24hr): Don Muang Airport–Chatuchak Weekend Market–Victory Monument–Thanon Phrayathai–Thanon Phetchaburi–Phan Fah (for Khlong Saen Saeb and Golden Mount)–Democracy Monument (for Banglamphu guest houses)–Sanam Luang.

and 7.30pm (6.40pm on Sat & Sun). Boats do not necessarily stop at every landing – they only pull in if people want to get on or off, and when they do stop, it's not for long – so when you want to get off, be ready at the back of the boat in good time for your pier. During busy periods, certain **"special express"** boats operate limited-stop services on set routes, flying either a **blue flag** (Nonthaburi to Tha Sathorn in 35min, stopping only at Wang Lang; Mon–Fri roughly 6–9am & 5–7pm), a **yellow flag** (Nonthaburi to Rajburana, far downriver beyond Krung Thep Bridge, in about 50min; Mon–Fri roughly 6–9am & 4–7.30pm) or an **orange flag** (Nonthaburi to Wat Rajsingkorn in 1hr; Mon–Fri roughly 6–9am & 2.30–7pm).

Tickets can be bought on board, and cost B9–13 on standard boats according to distance travelled, B13 flat rate on orange-flag boats, B18–27 on yellow-flag boats and B22–32 on blue-flag boats. Don't discard your ticket until you're off the boat,

#124 (ordinary): Southern Bus Terminal–Phra Pinklao Bridge–Sanam Luang (for Banglamphu guest houses).

#159 (ordinary): Southern Bus Terminal–Phra Pinklao Bridge–Democracy Monument–Hualamphong Station–MBK Shopping Centre–Thanon Ratchaprarop–Victory Monument–Chatuchak Weekend Market–Northern Bus Terminal.

#503 (air-con): Sanam Luang (for Banglamphu guest houses)–Democracy Monument–Rajdamnoen Nok (for TAT and boxing stadium)–Wat Benjamabophit–Thanon Sri Ayutthaya (for Thewes guest houses)–Victory Monument–Chatuchak Weekend Market–Rangsit. Note, however, that during rush hours, some #503 buses take the expressway, missing out Chatuchak Weekend Market.

#504 (air-con): Don Muang Airport–Thanon Rajaprarop–Thanon Rajdamri–Thanon Silom–Thanon Charoen Krung–Krungthep Bridge.

#507 (air-con): Southern Bus Terminal–Phra Pinklao Bridge (for Banglamphu guest houses)–Sanam Luang–Thanon Charoen Krung (New Road)–Thanon Chakraphet–Thanon Yaowarat (for Chinatown and Wat Traimit)–Hualamphong Station–Thanon Rama IV (for Soi Ngam Duphli guest houses)–Bang Na Intersection–Pak Nam (for Ancient City buses).

#508 (air-con): Thanon Maharat–Grand Palace–Thanon Charoen Krung–Siam Square–Thanon Sukhumvit–Eastern Bus Terminal–Pak Nam (for Ancient City buses). Note, however, that during rush hours, some #508 buses take the expressway, missing out the Eastern Bus Terminal.

#509 (air-con): Northern Bus Terminal–Chatuchak Weekend Market–Victory Monument–Thanon Rajwithi–Thanon Sawankhalok–Thanon Phitsanulok–Thanon Rajdamnoen Nok–Democracy Monument–Rajdamnoen Klang (for Banglamphu guest houses)–Phra Pinklao Bridge–Thonburi.

#511 (air-con, 24hr): Southern Bus Terminal–Phra Pinklao Bridge–Wat Bowoniwes (for Banglamphu guest houses)–Democracy Monument–Thanon Lan Luang–Thanon Phetchaburi–Thanon Sukhumvit–Eastern Bus Terminal–Pak Nam (for Ancient City buses). Note, however, that during the day, some #511 buses take the expressway, missing out the Eastern Bus Terminal.

#512 (air-con): Northern Bus Terminal–Chatuchak Weekend Market–Thanon Phetchaburi–Thanon Lan Luang–Democracy Monument (for Banglamphu guest houses)–Sanam Luang–Tha Chang (for Grand Palace)–Pak Khlong Talat.

#513 (air-con): Don Muang Airport–Victory Monument–Thanon Phraya Thai–Thanon Sri Ayutthaya–Thanon Rajaprarop–Eastern Bus Terminal–Thanon Sukhumvit. Note, however, that some #513 buses take the expressway, missing out the section from Victory Monument to the Eastern Bus Terminal.

as the staff at some piers impose a B1 fine on anyone disembarking without one.

The Chao Phraya Express Boat Company also runs **tourist boats**, distinguished by their light-blue flags, between Sathorn (departs every 30min 9.30am–3pm on the hour and half-hour) and Banglamphu piers (departs every 30min 10am–3.30pm on the hour and half-hour). In between (in both directions), these boats call in at Oriental, Si Phraya, Rachawongse, Saphan Phut, the Princess Mother Memorial Park in Thonburi, Thien, Maharaj (near Wat Mahathat and the Grand Palace) and Wang Lang; there are also free connecting boats from Tha Banglamphu across to the Royal Barge Museum. On-board guides provide running commentaries, and a one-day ticket for unlimited trips, which also allows you to use other express boats within the same route between 9am and 7.30pm, costs B100; one-way tickets are also available, costing, for example, B20 from Tha Sathorn to Maharaj.

Central stops for the Chao Phraya express boats

N15	Thewes (all boats except blue flag) – for Thewes guest houses.
N14	Rama VIII Bridge (standard) – for Samsen Soi 5.
N13	Phra Athit (standard and orange flag) – for Thanon Phra Athit, Thanon Khao San and Banglamphu guest houses.
N12	Phra Pinklao Bridge (all boats except blue flag) – for Royal Barge Museum and Thonburi shops.
N11	Thonburi Railway Station (or Bangkok Noi; standard) – for trains to Kanchanaburi.
N10	Wang Lang (or Siriraj; all standard and special express boats) – for Siriraj Hospital and hospital museums.
N9	Chang (standard and orange flag) – for the Grand Palace.
N8	Thien (standard) – for Wat Pho, and the cross-river ferry to Wat Arun.
N7	Ratchini (aka Rajinee; standard).
N6	Saphan Phut (Memorial Bridge; standard and orange flag) – for Pahurat, Pak Khlong Talat and Wat Prayoon.
N5	Rachawongse (aka Rajawong; all boats except blue flag) – for Chinatown.
N4	Harbour Department (standard and orange flag).
N3	Si Phraya (all boats except blue flag) – walk north past the *Sheraton Royal Orchid Hotel* for River City shopping complex.
N2	Wat Muang Kae (standard) – for GPO.
N1	Oriental (standard and orange flag) – for Thanon Silom.
Central	Sathorn (all standard and special express boats) – for the Skytrain Saphan Taksin Station) and Thanon Sathorn.

Piers are marked on the map on p.92.

Cross-river ferries

Smaller than express boats are the slow **cross-river ferries** (*reua kham fak*), which shuttle back and forth between the same two points. Found at or beside every express stop and plenty of other piers in between, they are especially useful for exploring Thonburi and for connections to Chao Phraya special express-boat stops during rush hours. Fares are B2–3, which you usually pay at the entrance to the pier.

Longtail boats

Longtail boats (*reua hang yao*) ply the khlongs of Thonburi like commuter buses, stopping at designated shelters (fares are in line with those of express boats), and are available for individual rental here and on the river (see box on p.145). On the Bangkok side, **Khlong Saen Saeb** is well served by longtails, which run at least every fifteen minutes during daylight hours from the Phan Fah pier at the Golden Mount (handy for Banglamphu, Ratanakosin and Chinatown), and head way out east to Wat Sribunruang, with useful stops at Thanon Phrayathai, aka Saphan Hua Chang (for Jim Thompson's House and Ratchathevi Skytrain stop); Pratunam (for the Erawan Shrine); Soi Chitlom; Thanon Witthayu (Wireless Road); and Soi Nana Nua (Soi 3), Thanon Asok Montri (Soi 21, for TAT headquarters and Phetchaburi subway stop), Soi Thonglo (Soi 55) and Soi Ekamai (Soi 63), all off Thanon Sukhumvit. This is your quickest and most interesting way of getting between the west and east parts of town, if you can stand the stench of the canal. You may have trouble actually locating the piers as few are signed in English and they all look very unassuming and rickety; see the map on p.92 for locations and keep your eyes peeled for a plain wooden jetty – most jetties serve boats running in both directions. Once on the boat, state your destination to the conductor when he

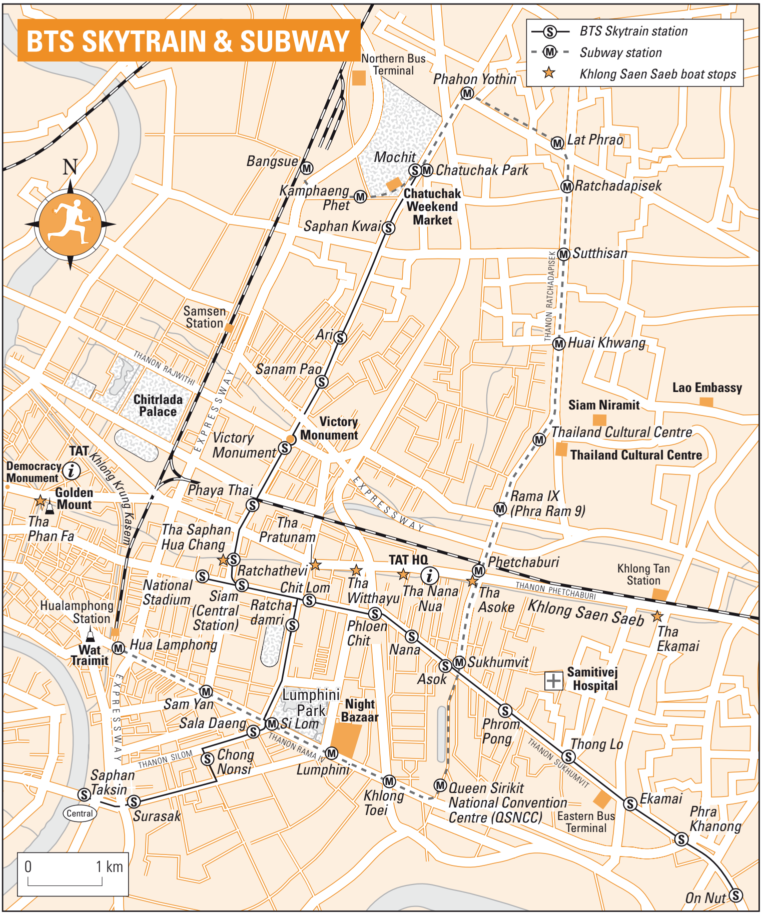
△ Longtail boat

collects your fare, which will be between B8 and B18. Due to the construction of some low bridges, all passengers change onto a different boat at Tha Pratunam and then again at the stop way out east on Sukhumvit Soi 71 – just follow the crowd.

The Skytrain

Although its network is limited, the **BTS Skytrain**, or *rot fai faa* (Ⓦwww.bts.co.th), provides a much faster alternative to the bus, and is clean, efficient and vigorously air-conditioned. There are only two Skytrain lines, both running every few minutes from around 6am to midnight, with **fares** of B10–40 per trip depending on distance travelled. You'd really have to be motoring to justify buying a day **pass** at B100, while the ten-trip, fifteen-trip and thirty-trip cards, for B250, B300 and B540 respectively (valid for thirty days), are designed for long-distance commuters.

The **Sukhumvit Line** runs from Mo Chit (stop #N8) in the northern part of the city (near Chatuchak Market and the Northern Bus Terminal) south via Victory


BTS SKYTRAIN & SUBWAY
Ⓢ BTS Skytrain station
Ⓜ Subway station
★ Khlong Saen Saeb boat stops
N
Northern Bus Terminal
Phahon Yothin
Lat Phrao
Ratchadapisek
Bangsue
Mochit
Chatuchak Park
Kamphaeng Phet
Chatuchak Weekend Market
Saphan Kwai
Sutthisan
THANON RATCHADAPISEK
Samsen Station
Ari
Huai Khwang
THANON RAJWITHI
Sanam Pao
Chitrlada Palace
EXPRESSWAY
Lao Embassy
Siam Niramit
Victory Monument
Victory Monument
Thailand Cultural Centre
Thailand Cultural Centre
TAT
Khlong Krung Kasem
Democracy Monument
Golden Mount
Phaya Thai
Rama IX (Phra Ram 9)
Tha Phan Fa
EXPRESSWAY
Tha Saphan Hua Chang
Tha Pratunam
TAT HQ
Phetchaburi
Khlong Tan Station
Ratchathevi
THANON PHETCHABURI
National Stadium
Chit Lom
Tha Witthayu
Tha Nana Nua
Tha Asoke
Khlong Saen Saeb
Tha Ekamai
Hualamphong Station
Siam (Central Station)
Ratchadamri
Phloen Chit
Nana
Wat Traimit
Hua Lamphong
Asok
Sukhumvit
Samitivej Hospital
EXPRESSWAY
Sam Yan
Lumphini Park
Night Bazaar
Sala Daeng
Si Lom
Phrom Pong
THANON RAMA IV
Thong Lo
THANON SUKHUMVIT
Chong Nonsi
THANON SILOM
Lumphini
Saphan Taksin
Khlong Toei
Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre (QSNCC)
Ekamai
Central
Surasak
Eastern Bus Terminal
Phra Khanong
0 1 km
On Nut

Monument (N3) to the interchange, **Central Station**, at Siam Square, and then east along Thanon Ploenchit and Thanon Sukhumvit, via the Eastern Bus Terminal (Ekamai; E7), to On Nut (Soi 77, Thanon Sukhumvit; E9); the whole journey to the eastern end of town from Mo Chit takes around thirty minutes.

The **Silom Line** runs from the National Stadium (W1), just west of Siam Square, through Central Station, and then south along Thanon Rajdamri, Thanon Silom and Thanon Sathorn, via Sala Daeng near Patpong (S2), to Saphan Taksin (Sathorn Bridge; S6), to link up with the full gamut of express boats on the Chao Phraya River. Free feeder buses for Skytrain passholders, currently covering six circular routes, mostly along Thanon Sukhumvit, are geared more for commuters than visitors, but pick up a copy of the ubiquitous free BTS **map** if you want more information.

The subway

Bangkok's underground rail system, the **subway** (or metro; in Thai, *rot fai tai din*; Ⓦwww.bangkokmetro.co.th), has similar advantages to the Skytrain, though its current single line connects few places of interest for visitors. With fares of between B14 and B36, the subway runs a frequent service (every 2–7min) between around 6.30am and 11.30pm from Hualamphong train station, first heading east along Thanon Rama IV, with useful stops at Sam Yan (for Si Phraya and Phrayathai roads), Silom (near the Sala Daeng Skytrain station) and Lumphini (Thanon Sathorn/southeast corner of Lumphini Park). The line then turns north up Thanon Asok Montri/Thanon Ratchadapisek via the Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre, Sukhumvit Station (near Asok Skytrain station), Phetchaburi (handy for Khlong Saen Saeb boats) and the Thailand Cultural Centre, before looping around via Chatuchak Park (near Mo Chit Skytrain station) and Kampaeng Phet (best stop for the weekend market) to terminate at Bang Sue railway station in the north of the city.

Taxis

Bangkok **taxis** come in three forms, and are so plentiful that you rarely have to wait more than a couple of minutes before spotting an empty one of any description. Neither tuk-tuks nor motorbike taxis have meters, so you should agree on a price before setting off, and expect to do a fair amount of haggling.

For nearly all journeys, the best and most comfortable option is to flag down one of Bangkok's metered, air-conditioned **taxi cabs**; look out for the "TAXI METER" sign on the roof, and a red light in the windscreen in front of the passenger seat, which means the cab is available for hire. Fares start at B35, and are displayed on a clearly visible meter that the driver should reset at the start of each trip, and increase in stages on a combined distance/time formula; as an example, a medium-range journey from Thanon Ploenchit to Thanon Sathorn will cost around B50 at a quiet time of day. Try to have change with you as cabs tend not to carry a lot of money; tipping of up to ten percent is common, though occasionally a cabbie will round down the fare on the meter. If a driver tries to quote a flat fare rather than using the meter, let him go, and avoid the now-rare unmetered cabs (denoted by a "TAXI" sign on the roof). If you want to book a metered taxi (B20 surcharge), call Siam Taxi Co-operative on Ⓣ1661 or Taxi Radio on Ⓣ1681.

Somewhat less stable though typically Thai, **tuk-tuks** have little to recommend them. These noisy, three-wheeled, open-sided buggies, which can carry three medium-sized passengers comfortably, fully expose you to the worst of Bangkok's pollution and weather. Locals might use tuk-tuks for short journeys – though you'll have to bargain hard to get a fare lower than the taxi-cab flagfall of B35

– while a longer trip from Thanon Ploenchit to Thanon Sathorn, for example, will set you back up to B100. Be aware, also, that tuk-tuk drivers tend to speak less English than taxi drivers – and there have been cases of robberies and attacks on women passengers late at night. During the day it's quite common for tuk-tuk drivers to try and **con** their passengers into visiting a jewellery or expensive souvenir shop with them, for which they get a hefty commission; the usual tactic involves falsely informing tourists that the Grand Palace, or whatever their destination might be, is closed (see p.125), and offering instead a ridiculously cheap, even free, city tour.

Motorbike taxis generally congregate at the entrances to long sois – pick the riders out by their numbered, coloured vests – and charge around B10 for short trips down into the side streets. If you're short on time and have nerves of steel, it's also possible to charter them for hairy journeys out on the main roads (a trip from Thanon Ploenchit to Thanon Sathorn should cost around B50). Crash helmets are compulsory on all main roads in the capital (traffic police fine non-wearers on the spot), though they're rarely worn on trips down the sois and the local press has reported complaints from people who've caught head-lice this way (they suggest wearing a headscarf under the helmet).

Accommodation

If your time in Bangkok is limited, you should think especially carefully about what you want to do in the city before deciding which part of town to stay in. Traffic jams are so appalling here that easy access to relevant train networks and river transport can be crucial.

For double rooms under B400, your widest choice lies with the **guest houses** of Banglamphu and the smaller, dingier travellers' ghetto that has grown up around Soi Ngam Duphli, off the south side of Thanon Rama IV. The most inexpensive rooms here are no-frills crash-pads – small and often windowless, with thin walls and shared bathrooms. Unless you pay cash in advance, bookings are rarely accepted by guest houses, but it's often worth phoning to establish whether a place is full already. During peak season (Nov–Feb) you may have difficulty getting a room after noon.

Banglamphu is also starting to cater for the slightly better-off tourist and you'll find some good mid-priced options along and around Thanon Khao San. But the majority of the city's **moderate and expensive** rooms are concentrated downtown around Siam Square and Thanon Ploenchit and in the area between Thanon Rama IV and Thanon Charoen Krung (New Road), along Thanon Sukhumvit, and to a lesser extent in Chinatown. Air-conditioned rooms with hot-water bathrooms can be had for around B500 in these areas, but for that you're looking at a rather basic cubicle; you'll probably have to pay more like B800 for smart furnishings and a swimming pool. The cream of Bangkok's **deluxe** tourist accommodation, with rates starting from B4000, is scenically sited along the banks of the Chao Phraya River, though there are a few top-notch hotels in the downtown area too, which is also where you'll find the best business hotels. Details of accommodation **near the airport** are given on p.94.

Banglamphu

Nearly all backpackers head straight for **Banglamphu**, Bangkok's long-established travellers' ghetto, location of the cheapest accommodation and some of the best nightlife in the city, and arguably the most enjoyable area to base yourself in the

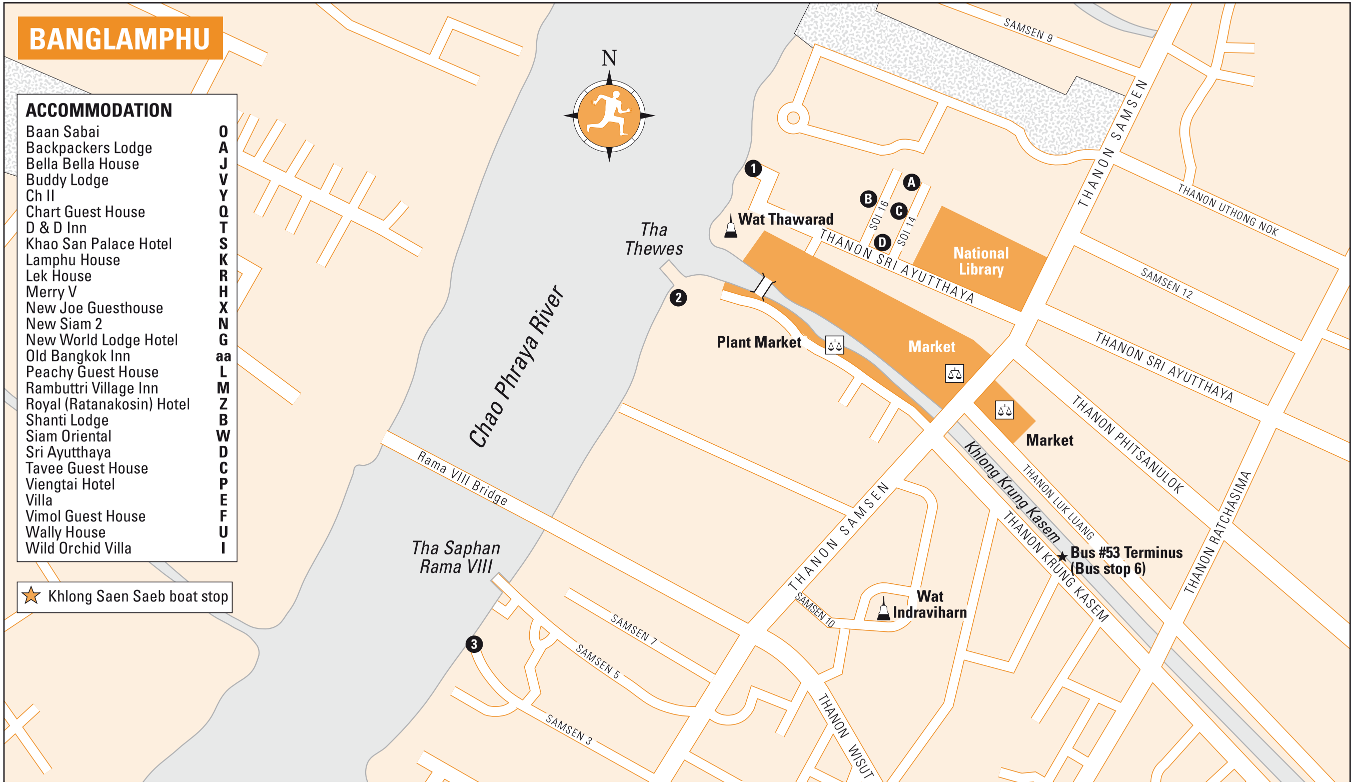
△ Sidewalk stalls, Banglamphu

city. It's within easy reach of the Grand Palace and other major sights in **Ratanakosin** (which has only one, very plush, accommodation option of its own), and has enough bars, restaurants and shops to keep any visitor happy for a week or more, though some people find this insularity tiresome after just a few hours.

At the heart of Banglamphu is the legendary **Thanon Khao San** (Ⓦ www.khaosanroad.com), almost a caricature of a travellers' centre, crammed with Internet cafés, dodgy travel agents and restaurants serving yoghurt shakes and muesli, the sidewalks lined with stalls and shops flogging cheap backpackers' fashions, racks of bootleg music and video CDs, tattooists and hair-braiders. It's a lively, high-energy base: great for shopping and making travel arrangements (though beware the innumerable Khao San scams, as outlined on p.69) and a good place to meet other travellers. It's especially fun at night when young Thais from all over the city gather here to browse the temporary clothes stalls, mingle with the crowds of foreigners and squash into the bars and clubs that have made Khao San *the* place to party.

The increasingly sophisticated nightlife scene has enticed more moneyed travellers into Banglamphu and a growing number of Khao San **guest houses** are reinventing themselves as good-value mini-hotels boasting chic decor, swimming pools, and even views from the windows – a remarkable facelift from the cardboard cells of old. The cheap sleeps are still there though – in the darker corners of Khao San itself, as well as on the smaller, quieter roads off and around it. Rooms overlooking Thanon Khao San are noisy late into the night, and the same is increasingly true of accommodation on parallel **Thanon Ram Bhuttri**, where a plethora of bars keeps the street busy at all hours. Things are a little quieter on the roads that encircle the nearby temple, Wat Chana Songkhran, namely **Soi Ram Bhuttri** and its feeder alley, **Soi Chana Songkhram**; along **Phra Athit**, which runs parallel to the Chao Phraya River and is packed with trendy Thai café-bars and restaurants (and also has a useful express-boat stop); and in the residential alleyways that parallel Thanon Khao San to the south: **Trok Mayom** and **Damnoen Klang Neua**. About ten minutes' walk north from Thanon Khao San, the handful of guest houses

BANGLAMPHU


N
Chao Phraya River
Tha Thewes
Tha Saphan Rama VIII
Rama VIII Bridge
Wat Thawarad
Plant Market
Market
National Library
Market
Wat Indraviharn
Bus #53 Terminus (Bus stop 6)
Khlong Krung Kasem
THANON SAMSEN
THANON UTHONG NOK
SAMSEN 9
SAMSEN 12
SOI 14
SOI 16
THANON SRI AYUTTHAYA
THANON PHITSANULOK
THANON RATCHASIMA
THANON LUK LUANG
THANON KRUNG KASEM
SAMSEN 10
THANON WISUT
SAMSEN 7
SAMSEN 5
SAMSEN 3
1
2
3
A
B
C
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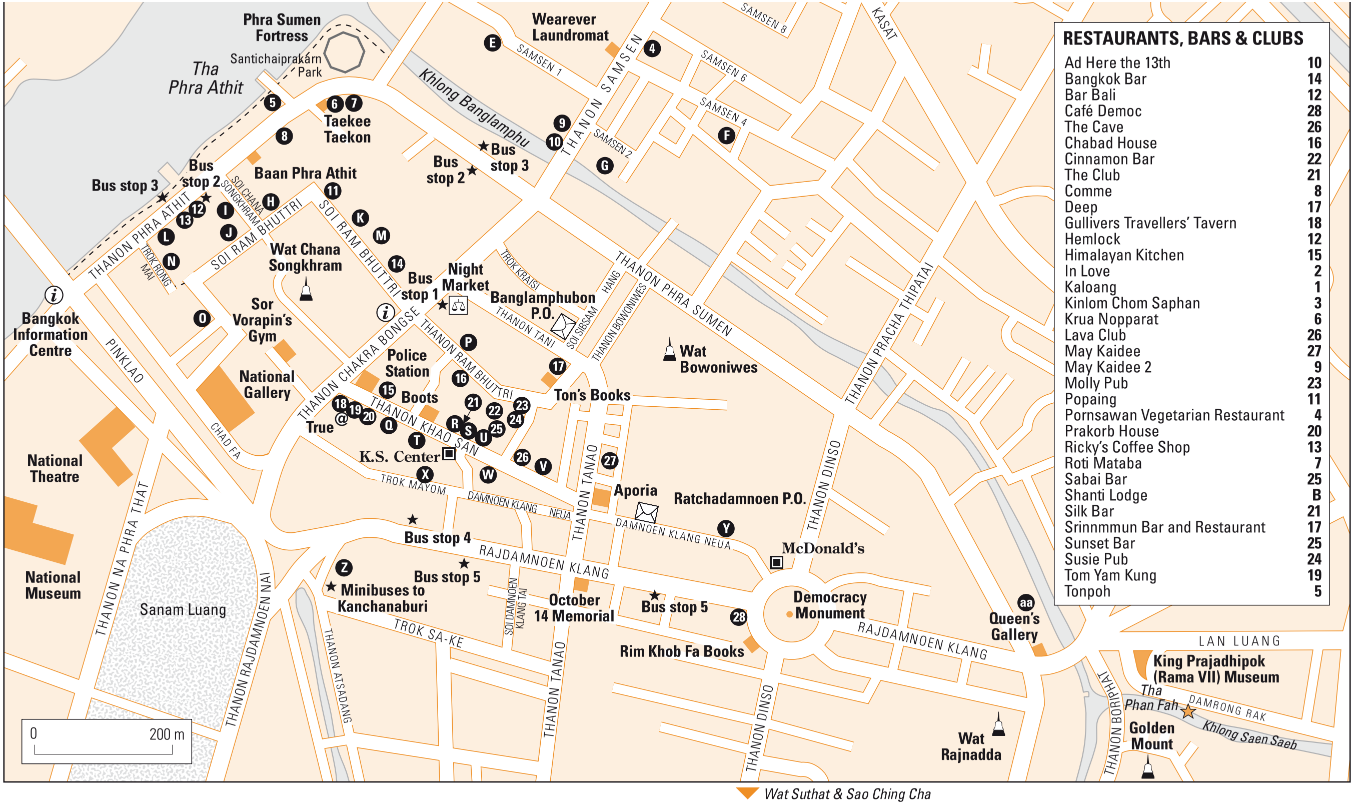
ACCOMMODATION	
Baan Sabai	O
Backpackers Lodge	A
Bella Bella House	J
Buddy Lodge	V
Ch II	Y
Chart Guest House	Q
D & D Inn	T
Khao San Palace Hotel	S
Lamphu House	K
Lek House	R
Merry V	H
New Joe Guesthouse	X
New Siam 2	N
New World Lodge Hotel	G
Old Bangkok Inn	aa
Peachy Guest House	L
Rambuttri Village Inn	M
Royal (Ratanakosin) Hotel	Z
Shanti Lodge	B
Siam Oriental	W
Sri Ayutthaya	D
Tavee Guest House	C
Viengtai Hotel	P
Villa	E
Vimol Guest House	F
Wally House	U
Wild Orchid Villa	I

★ Khlong Saen Saeb boat stop


Phra Sumen Fortress
Santichaiprakarn Park
Tha Phra Athit
Bus stop 3
Bus stop 2
Wearever Laundromat
Taekee Taekon
Baan Phra Athit
Khlong Banglamphu
Bus stop 3
Bus stop 2
SAMSEN 1
SAMSEN 2
SAMSEN 4
SAMSEN 6
SAMSEN 8
THANON SAMSEN
KASAT
THANON PHRA ATHIT
SOI CHANA SONGKHRAM
SOI RAM BHUTTRI
TROK RONG MAI
Wat Chana Songkhram
Bangkok Information Centre
PINKLAO
Sor Vorapin's Gym
National Gallery
CHAD FA
Bus stop 1
Night Market
Banglamphubon P.O.
TROK KRAISI
THANON TANI
SOI SIBSAM
HANG
THANON BOWONNIWES
THANON PHRA SUMEN
THANON PRACHA THIPATAI
Wat Bowonniwes
THANON CHAKRA BONGSE
Police Station
THANON RAM BHUTTRI
Boots
Ton's Books
True
THANON KHAO SAN
K.S. Center
TROK MAYOM
DAMNOEN KLANG NEUA
THANON TANAO
Aporia
Ratchadamnoen P.O.
THANON DINSO
McDonald's
National Theatre
National Museum
THANON NA PHRA THAT
Sanam Luang
THANON RAJDAMNOEN NAI
Bus stop 4
RAJDAMNOEN KLANG
Bus stop 5
Minibuses to Kanchanaburi
THANON ATSADANG
TROK SA-KE
SOI DAMNOEN KLANG TAI
October 14 Memorial
Bus stop 5
Rim Khob Fa Books
Democracy Monument
RAJDAMNOEN KLANG
Queen's Gallery
LAN LUANG
King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) Museum
Tha Phan Fah
DAMRONG RAK
Khlong Saen Saeb
THANON BORIPHAT
Golden Mount
Wat Rajnadda
THANON DINSO
Wat Suthat & Sao Ching Cha
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200 m
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28
E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z aa @

RESTAURANTS, BARS & CLUBS

Ad Here the 13th	10
Bangkok Bar	14
Bar Bali	12
Café Democ	28
The Cave	26
Chabad House	16
Cinnamon Bar	22
The Club	21
Comme	8
Deep	17
Gullivers Travellers' Tavern	18
Hemlock	12
Himalayan Kitchen	15
In Love	2
Kaloang	1
Kinlom Chom Saphan	3
Krua Nopparat	6
Lava Club	26
May Kaidee	27
May Kaidee 2	9
Molly Pub	23
Popaing	11
Pornsawan Vegetarian Restaurant	4
Prakorb House	20
Ricky's Coffee Shop	13
Roti Mataba	7
Sabai Bar	25
Shanti Lodge	B
Silk Bar	21
Srinnmmun Bar and Restaurant	17
Sunset Bar	25
Susie Pub	24
Tom Yam Kung	19
Tonpoh	5

Banglamphu's bus stops and routes

Buses running out of Banglamphu have several different pick-up points in the area: to make things simpler, we've assigned numbers to these bus stops, though they are not numbered on the ground. Where there are two bus stops on the same route they share a number. Bus stops are marked on the Banglamphu map on pp.108–09. For on-the-spot advice, contact the BTB booth in front of Wat Chana Songkhram on Thanon Chakrabongse, and for a more detailed breakdown of Bangkok's bus routes see pp.100–01

Bus Stop 1: Thanon Chakrabongse, near the 7–11

#6, #9 to Pak Khlong Talat flower market
#6, #9, #32 to Wat Pho
#30 to the Southern Bus Terminal

Bus Stop 2: Thanon Phra Athit, south side, near *Hemlock*; and Thanon Phra Sumen, south side, near *Banglumpoo Place* hotel

#53 to the Grand Palace and Chinatown
#56 to Thanon Ratchasima for Vimanmek Palace and Dusit

Bus Stop 3: Thanon Phra Athit, north side, near the cross-river ferry entrance; and Thanon Phra Sumen, north side, opposite *Banglumpoo Place* hotel

#3 (air-con) to Chatuchak Weekend Market and Mo Chit Northern Bus Terminal
#53 to Hualamphong train station (change at Bus Stop 6, but same ticket)

Bus Stop 4: Thanon Rajdamnoen Klang, north side, outside Lottery Building

#2 to Ekamai Eastern Bus Terminal
#15, #47 to Jim Thompson's House, Thanon Silom and Patpong
#15, #47, #79, #79 (air-con) to Siam Square
#39, #44, #59, #503 (air-con), #509 (air-con), #157 (air-con) to Chatuchak Weekend Market
#47 to Lumphini boxing stadium
#59 to Don Muang Airport
#70, #201, #503 (air-con), #509 (air-con) to TAT and Ratchadamnoen boxing stadium
#70 to Dusit
#157 (air-con) to Mo Chit Northern Bus Terminal
#511 (air-con) to Ekamai Eastern Bus Terminal and Pak Nam (for Ancient City buses)

Bus Stop 5: Thanon Rajdamnoen Klang, south side

#44 to Sanam Luang, the Grand Palace and Wat Pho

Bus Stop 6: Thanon Krung Kasem, north side

#53 to Hualamphong train station (buses start from here)

scattered amongst the neighbourhood shophouses of the **Thanon Samsen sois** offer a more authentically Thai atmosphere. A further fifteen minutes' walk in the same direction will take you to **Thanon Sri Ayutthaya**, behind the National Library in **Thewes** (a seven-minute walk from the express-boat stop), the calmest area in Banglamphu, where rooms are larger and guest houses smaller.

We've listed only the cream of what's on offer in each small enclave of Banglamphu: if your first choice is full there'll almost certainly be a vacancy somewhere just along the soi, if not right next door. **Theft** is a problem in Banglamphu, particularly at the cheaper guest houses, so don't leave anything valuable in your room and heed the guest houses' notices about padlocks and safety lockers.

Banglamphu is served by plenty of **public transport**. All the guest houses listed lie only a few minutes' walk from Chao Phraya **express boat** stops N13 (Phra Athit, sometimes known as Banglamphu), N14 (Rama VIII Bridge) and N15 (Thewes), as detailed in the box on p.102. Note that if you're using the boat service in the evening to head downtown via the Central BTS train station at Saphan Taksin, the last boat leaves N13 at about 7.15pm. Banglamphu is also served by **public longtail boats** along Khlong Saen Saeb (see p.102), which leave from Phan Fah and have a particularly useful stop at Saphan Huachang, which is a few minutes' walk from both **BTS** Ratchathewi and BTS Siam (about every 10mins during daylight hours; B8; 10mins). The other fast way to get on to the BTS system is to take a taxi from Banglamphu to BTS National Stadium. For details of the most useful **buses** in and out of Banglamphu and where to catch them, see the box opposite. **Airport Express bus** AE2 from Suvarnabhumi Airport serves Banglamphu and makes several stops in the area; tickets cost B150 (see p.94). For transport to the airport from Banglamphu, it's easier to arrange a seat in a minibus through your guesthouse.

Traveller-oriented facilities in Banglamphu are second to none. The **Bangkok Information Centre** is on Thanon Phra Athit (see p.97), and there's a **tourist information booth** (Mon–Sat 9am–5pm) in front of Wat Chana Songkhram on Thanon Chakrabongse, near the Soi Ram Bhuttri junction. The closest **poste restante** service to Khao San is at Ratchadamnoen Post Office on the eastern stretch of Soi Damnoen Klang Neua, but the one at Banglamphubon Post Office near Wat Bowoniwes is also handy (for full details see p.190). Almost every alternate building on Thanon Khao San, Thanon Ram Bhuttri and Soi Ram Bhuttri offers **Internet access**, as do many of the guest houses; intense competition keeps the rates very low (B40/hour or less) and there's an especially enticing cyber lounge, *True*, on Khao San (details on p.189). There are also Catnet Internet terminals (see Basics, p.77) at the Ratchadamnoen Post Office. As well as numerous money **exchange** places on Thanon Khao San, you'll find two branches of national banks, several ATMs, an outlet for Boots the Chemist and a couple of self-service **laundries**; at the Wearever laundromat on Thanon Samsen, between sois 1 and 3, you can also lounge on sofas, drink coffee, and enjoy free wi-fi access. Several places will download your digital pictures onto a CD (see Listings p.190).

Thanon Khao San, Thanon Ram Bhuttri and Soi Damnoen Klang Neua

Buddy Lodge 265 Thanon Khao San Ⓣ02 629 4477, Ⓦwww.buddylodge.com. The most stylish and expensive hotel on Khao San and right in the thick of the action. The charming, colonial-style rooms are done out in cream, with louvred shutters, balconies, air-con and polished dark-wood floors, though they are not as pristine as you might expect for the price. There's a beautiful rooftop pool, a spa (see p.190), and several bars and restaurants downstairs in the Buddy Village complex. Specify an upper-floor location away from Khao San to ensure a quieter night's sleep. ⑦

Chart Guest House 62 Thanon Khao San Ⓣ02 282 0171, Ⓔchartguesthouse@hotmail.com. Clean, comfortable enough hotel in the heart of the road; the cheapest rooms have no view and share a bathroom; the priciest have air-con and windows. Rooms in all categories are no-frills and a little cramped. Fan ② Fan and bathroom ③, air-con ④

Ch II 85 Soi Damnoen Klang Neua Ⓣ02 282 1596.

Shabby but cheap rooms, some with windows and some en suite, in a fairly quiet location, though you may be woken by the 5am prayer calls at the local mosque. There are only a couple of other guest houses on this road, so it has a local feel to it, even though Khao San is less than 200m away. Fan ①, fan and bathroom ②

D & D Inn 68–70 Thanon Khao San Ⓣ02 629 0526, Ⓦwww.khaosanby.com. The delightful rooftop pool, with expansive views, is the clincher at this good-value, mid-sized hotel located in the midst of the throng. Rooms all have air-con and satellite TV and are comfortably furnished and perfectly fine, if not immaculate. The cheapest single rooms have no window. ⑤

Khao San Palace Hotel 139 Thanon Khao San Ⓣ02 282 0578. Clean and well-appointed hotel with a rooftop pool. All rooms have bathrooms and windows and some also have air-con and TV. The best rooms are in the new wing – they're nicely tiled and some have panoramic views. Fan ③, air-con ③–④

Lek House 125 Thanon Khao San Ⓣ02 281 8441. Classic old-style Khao San guest house, with 20 small, basic rooms and shared facilities, but less shabby than many others in the same price bracket and a lot friendlier than most. Could get noisy at night as it's right next to the popular *Silk Bar*. ②

New Joe Guesthouse 81 Trok Mayom Ⓣ02 281 2948, Ⓦwww.newjoe.com. Very basic rooms in a block just behind Khao San, but they all have fans and private bathrooms. ②

Royal (Ratanakosin) Hotel 2 Thanon Rajdamnoen Klang Ⓣ02 222 9111. Determinedly old-fashioned hotel that's used mainly by older Thai tourists and for conferences. Air-con rooms in the new wing are decent enough if unexciting and there's a pool and a restaurant, but the chief attraction is the location, just a 5-min stroll from Sanam Luang (or a further 10min to the Grand Palace) – though getting to Thanon Khao San entails a life-endangering leap across 12 lanes of traffic. Old wing ⑥, new wing ⑦

Siam Oriental 190 Thanon Khao San Ⓣ02 629 0312, Ⓔsiam_oriental@hotmail.com. Small hotel right in the middle of Thanon Khao San, offering spartan but clean rooms, all with attached bathrooms and most with windows. Some rooms have air-con and a few also have balconies. Fan ③ air-con ③–⑤

Viengtai Hotel 42 Thanon Ram Bhuttri Ⓣ02 280 5392, Ⓦwww.viengtai.co.th. The second best of the options in Banglamphu's upper price bracket, with a good location just a few metres from the shops and restaurants of Thanon Khao San, though street-facing rooms get noise from the burgeoning number of Ram Bhuttri bars. Rooms are a decent size if not especially stylish, they all have air-con and TV, and there's a big pool. ⑦

Wally House 189/1–2 Thanon Khao San Ⓣ02 282 7067. Small guest house behind the restaurant and Internet cafe of the same name, with a range of very cheap, simple rooms, some of them en suite, the nicest of which are in a big, old, wooden-floored teak house set back from Khao San above a small courtyard. Fan ①, fan and bathroom ②

Ram Bhuttri, Chana Songkhram and Phra Athit

Baan Sabai 12 Soi Rong Mai, between Soi Ram Bhuttri and Thanon Chao Fa Ⓣ02 629 1599, Ⓔbaansabai@hotmail.com. Built round a courtyard, this large, upbeat, hotel-style guest house has a range of bright, fresh and decent-sized en-suite rooms, some of them air-con, though the cheapest have no windows. Fan ②, air-con ④

Bella Bella House Soi Ram Bhuttri Ⓣ02 629 3090. The pale-pink rooms in this guest house are decently priced and some boast lovely views over Wat Chana Songkhram. The cheapest share bathrooms, and the most expensive have air-con. Fan ②, air-con ③

Lamphu House 75 Soi Ram Bhuttri Ⓣ02 629 5861, Ⓦwww.lamphuhouse.com. With smart bamboo beds, coconut-wood clothes rails and elegant rattan lamps in even its cheapest rooms, this travellers' hotel has a cheery, modern feel. Cheapest rooms share facilities and have no outside view; the pricier ones have air-con and balconies overlooking the courtyard. Fan ②, fan and bathroom ③, air-con ④

Merry V Soi Ram Bhuttri Ⓣ02 282 9267. Large, efficiently run guest house offering some of the cheapest accommodation in Banglamphu. Rooms are basic and small, many share bathrooms and it's pot luck whether you get a window or not. Useful noticeboard in the downstairs restaurant. Fan ① fan and bathroom ③.

New Siam 2 50 Trok Rong Mai Ⓣ02 282 2795, Ⓦwww.newsiamguesthouse.com. Very pleasant and well-run small hotel whose en-suite fan and air-con rooms stand out for their thoughtfully designed extras such as in-room safes, cable TV and drying rails on the balconies. Occupies a quiet but convenient location and has a small streetside pool. Popular with families and triple rooms are also available. Fan ④, air-con ④

Peachy Guest House 10 Thanon Phra Athit Ⓣ02 281 6471. Popular, good value, very cheap place set round a small courtyard, with lots of clean, simple rooms, most with shared bathrooms but some with air-con. Fan and shared bathroom ①, air-con and shared bathroom ②, air-con and bathroom ③

Rambuttri Village Inn 95 Soi Ram Bhuttri ⓣ02 282 9162, ⓦwww.khaosan-hotels.com. The draw at this otherwise rather characterless six-storey hotel is the good-sized rooftop swimming pool. Rooms are plain and unadorned, either with or without bathroom and air-con, and the plaza out front is full of tailors' shops – and their touts. Book online only, and at least five days ahead. Fan and shared bathroom ③, air-con and bathroom ⑤

Wild Orchid Villa 8 Soi Chana Songkhram ⓣ02 629 4378, ⓔwild_orchid_villa@hotmail.com. Painted in an appropriately wild colour scheme of lemon, aqua and blackberry, this hotel features some cosily furnished air-con rooms at the top of its price range (though their bathrooms are inconveniently accessed via the balcony), and some much less interesting windowless options, with shared bathrooms, at the bottom end. Has a very pleasant seating area out front. Fan and shared bathroom ②, air-con and shared bathroom ④

Samsen sois, Thewes and the fringes

Backpackers Lodge 85 Soi 14, Thanon Sri Ayutthaya ⓣ02 282 3231. Quiet, family-run place in the peaceful Thewes quarter of north Banglamphu. Just 12 simple partition-walled rooms, all with shared bathroom, and a communal area downstairs. ②

New World Lodge Hotel Samsen Soi 2 ⓣ02 281 5596, ⓦwww.newworldlodge.com. Friendly, well-run Muslim hotel in an interesting traditional neighbourhood. Rooms are large, smartly outfitted and have air-con, TV and tiny balconies; some have khlong views. There's also a pleasant canalside seating area and café. The cheapest rooms in the much less appealing guest-house wing are shabby and share bathrooms. Guest house ②, hotel ⑥

Old Bangkok Inn 609 Thanon Phra Sumen ⓣ02 629 1785, ⓦwww.oldbangkokinn.com. This chic little boutique guest house has just ten air-con rooms, each of them styled in dark wood, with antique north-Thai partitions and antique Burmese doors, beds and ironwork lamps, plus elegant contemporary-accented bathrooms. All rooms have a PC with free broadband access and DVD player. Some also have a tiny private garden. Very convenient for the Khlong Saen Saeb canal-boat service and 15 minutes' walk from Tha Phra Athit express-boat pier or 10 minutes' walk from Khao San. ⑧

Shanti Lodge 37 Soi 16,Thanon Sri Ayutthaya ⓣ02 281 2497, ⓦwww.shantilodge.com. Quiet place with an appealingly laid-back, whole-earth vibe and a variety of small but characterful rooms – some have rattan walls, others are decorated with Indian motifs. The cheapest share bathrooms, the most expensive have air-con. Has a very good, predominantly vegetarian restaurant downstairs (see p.163). Fan ②, fan and bathroom ③, air-con ④

Sri Ayutthaya 23/11 Soi 14, Thanon Sri Ayutthaya ⓣ02 282 5942. The most attractive guest house in Thewes, where the good-sized rooms (choose between fan rooms with or without private bathroom and en suites with air-con) are elegantly done out with beautiful wood-panelled walls and polished wood floors. Fan ③, air-con ④

Tavee Guest House 83 Soi 14, Thanon Sri Ayutthaya ⓣ02 282 5983. Decent-sized rooms; quiet and friendly and one of the cheaper places in the Thewes quarter. Offers rooms with shared bathroom plus some en-suite ones with air-con. Fan ②, air-con ④

Villa 230 Samsen Soi 1 ⓣ02 281 7009. One of Banglamphu's more therapeutic guest houses, in a lovely old Thai home and garden with just ten large rooms, each idiosyncratically furnished in simple, semi-traditional style; bathrooms are shared and rooms are priced according to their size. Just five minutes' walk from Khao San. ③–④

Vimol Guest House 358 Samsen Soi 4 ⓣ02 281 4615. Old-style, family-run guest house in a quiet but interesting neighbourhood that has just a smattering of other tourist places. The simple, cramped, hardboard-walled rooms are ultra-basic and have shared bathrooms but are possibly the cheapest in Banglamphu. ①

Ratanakosin

Chakrabongse Villas 396 Thanon Maharat ⓣ02 224 6686, ⓦwww.thaivillas.com; see Ratanakosin map on p.124. Riverside luxury accommodation with a difference: in the luxuriant gardens of hundred-year-old Chakrabongse House, overlooking Wat Arun and within walking distance of Wat Pho, three tranquil villas beautifully furnished in dark wood and silk, with polished teak floors. All have air-con and cable TV, and there's a small, attractive swimming pool and an open-sided riverfront pavilion for relaxing or dining (if ordered in advance). ⑨

Chinatown and Hualamphong Station area

Not far from the Ratanakosin sights, and within fifteen minutes' walk of Siam Square, **Chinatown** (**Sampeng**) is one of the most frenetic and quintessentially Asian parts of Bangkok. Staying here, or in one of the sois around the conveniently close **Hualamphong Station**, can be noisy, but there's always plenty to look at, and some people choose to base themselves in this area in order to get away from the travellers' scene in Banglamphu. All listed accommodation is marked on the map on p.140.

Hualamphong is on the **subway** system, and Chinatown is served by a number of useful **bus** routes, including west-bound air-conditioned #507 and ordinary buses #25, #40 and #53, which all go to Ratanakosin (for Wat Pho and the Grand Palace); the east-bound #16, #25 and #40 buses all go to Siam Square, where you change onto the Skytrain. For more details, see box on pp.100–01.

Baan Hualamphong 336/20 Soi Chalong Krung ⓣ02 639 8054, ⓦwww.baan-hualampong.com. Custom-built wooden guest house that's attractively designed, has stylish modern decor and is fitted with contemporary bathrooms and furnishings. There are big, bright, double rooms plus five-person dorms at B200 per bed, but all rooms share bathrooms. Has kitchen facilities, inviting lounging areas and a roof terrace, and provides a left-luggage service. ④

Bangkok Centre 328 Thanon Rama IV ⓣ02 238 4848, ⓦwww.bangkokcentrehotel.com. Handily placed upper-mid-range option with efficient service right by the subway station and just across the road from the train station. Rooms are smartly furnished if a little old-fashioned, and all have air-con and TV; there's a pool, restaurant and Internet access on the premises. ⑥

FF Guest House 338/10 Trok La-O, off Thanon Rama IV ⓣ02 233 4168.Tiny, family-run guest house offering ten cheap, basic rooms with shared bathrooms. Located at the end of an alley just a 5-min walk from the train and subway stations. ②

Grand China Princess 215 Thanon Yaowarat ⓣ02 224 9977, ⓦwww.grandchina.com. The poshest hotel in Chinatown boasts fairly luxurious accommodation in its 27-storey-high tower close to the heart of the bustle, with stunning views over all the city landmarks, a small rooftop swimming pool, revolving panoramic restaurant and several other food outlets. ⑦

New Empire Hotel 572 Thanon Yaowarat ⓣ02 234 6990, ⓦwww.newempirehotel.com. Medium-sized hotel right in the thick of the Chinatown bustle, offering pretty decent superior (renovated) rooms with air-con and TV and some slightly cheaper, rather faded versions. In either category, it's worth requesting a room on the seventh floor to get panoramic views towards the river. ④–⑤

River View Guest House 768 Soi Panurangsri, Thanon Songvad ⓣ02 235 8501, ⓔriverview_bkk@hotmail.com. Large, plain, old-style rooms, with fans at the lower end of the range, air-con, and TVs at the top. Great views over the bend in the river from upper-floor rooms, some of which have balconies, and especially from the top-floor restaurant. Located in a lively if hard-to-find spot right next to the Chinese temple San Jao Sien Khong: head north for 400m from River City shopping centre (on the express-boat line) along Soi Wanit 2, before following signs to the guest house to the left. Fan ③, air-con ④

TT2 Guest House 516 Soi Kaeo Fa (formerly Soi Sawang and known to taxi drivers as such), off Thanon Maha Nakorn ⓣ02 236 2946, ⓔttguesthouse@hotmail.com. A long-running, traveller-friendly budget place, this guest house is clean, friendly and well run, keeps good bulletin boards, has Internet access and a small library and stores left luggage at B10 a day. All rooms share bathrooms. During high season, there are B100 beds in a three-person dorm. Roughly a 15min walk from either the station or the N3 Si Phraya express-boat stop; to get here from the train station, cross Thanon Rama IV, then walk left for 250m, cross Thanon Maha Nakorn and walk down it (following signs for "TT2") for 275m as far as Soi Kaeo Fa, where you turn left and then first right. The guest house is opposite Wat Kaeo Jam Fa. ②

Thonburi

Few tourists stay on the **Thonburi** side of the river, though many visit its canals and temples (see p.143). It's surprisingly convenient, with express boats and cross-river shuttles serving Banglamphu and Ratanakosin across on the other bank.

Ibrik Resort by the River 256 Soi Wat Rakang ⓣ02 848 9220, ⓦwww.ibrikresort.com. With just three rooms, this is the most bijou of boutique resorts. Each room is beautifully appointed in boho-chic style, with traditional wood floors, modernist white walls and sparkling silk accessories – and two of them have balconies right over the Chao Phraya River. It's just like staying at a trendy friend's in a neighbourhood that sees hardly any other tourists and is famous for its great street-food market at nearby Tha Wang Lang. It's right next door to *Supatra River House* restaurant and five minutes' walk from express-boat stop Tha Wang Lang/Phrannok, just one ferry stop from the Grand Palace across the river. ⑧

Siam Square, Thanon Ploenchit and northern downtown

Siam Square – not really a square, but a grid of shops and restaurants between Thanon Phrayathai and Thanon Henri Dunant – and nearby **Thanon Ploenchit** are as central as Bangkok gets, at the heart of the Skytrain system and with all kinds of shopping on hand. There's no ultra-cheap accommodation here, but a few scaled-up guest houses have sprung up alongside the expensive hotels. Concentrated in their own small "ghetto" on **Soi Kasemsan 1**, which runs north off Thanon Rama I just west of Thanon Phrayathai and is the next soi along from Jim Thompson's House (see p.152), these offer an informal guest-house atmosphere, with hotel comforts – air-conditioning and en-suite hot-water bathrooms – at moderate prices. Several luxury hotels have set up on **Thanon Witthayu**, aka **Wireless Road**, home of the American and British embassies (among others). Accommodation here is marked on the **maps** on p.92 and p.151.

Inexpensive and moderate

A-One Inn 25/13 Soi Kasemsan 1, Thanon Rama I ⓣ02 215 3029, ⓦwww.aoneinn.com. The original upscale guest house, and still justifiably popular, with Internet access and a reliable left-luggage room. Bedrooms all have satellite TV and come in a variety of sizes, including family rooms (but no singles). ④

The Bed & Breakfast 36/42 Soi Kasemsan 1, Thanon Rama I ⓣ02 215 3004, ⓕ02 215 2493. Bright, clean and family-run, though the rooms – carpeted and with en-suite telephones – are a bit cramped. As the name suggests, a simple breakfast – coffee, toast and fruit – is included. ④

Far East Inn 20/8–11 Soi Bangkok Bazaar, Soi Chitlom ⓣ02 255 4041–5, ⓦwww.geocities.com/fareastinn or www.tyha.org. The large rooms here are unexceptional but well equipped – air-con, cable TV, mini-bars and baths with hot water – and the place is friendly, very central and reasonably quiet. Discounts for YHA members. ⑥

Patumwan House 22 Soi Kasemsan 1, Thanon Rama I ⓣ02 612 3580–99, ⓦwww.patumwan-house.com. Around the corner at the far end of the soi, with very large, though rather bare rooms with satellite TV, fridges and wardrobes; facilities include a café and Internet access. At the lower end of this price code. Discounted weekly and monthly rates. ⑥

Reno Hotel 40 Soi Kasemsan 1, Thanon Rama I ⓣ02 215 0026, ⓔrenohotel@bblife.com. Friendly hotel, boasting large, comfortable, en-suite rooms with air-con, hot water and TV, a small swimming pool and a stylishly refurbished bar-restaurant where breakfast is served (included in the price). Internet access; small discounts for stays of a fortnight or a month. ⑤

VIP Guest House 1025/5–9 Thanon Ploenchit ⓣ02 252 9535–8, ⓔghouse_g@hotmail.com. Very clean, self-styled "boutique" hotel in a peerless location. In the attractive, parquet-floored rooms (all with air-con and hot water), large beds leave just enough space for a couple of armchairs and a dressing table, as well as cable TV, mini-bar and tea- and coffee-making facilities. Breakfast included. ⑥

Wendy House 36/2 Soi Kasemsan 1, Thanon Rama I ⓣ02 214 1149–50, ⓦwww.wendyguesthouse.com. Friendly and well-run guest house, with smart, clean and comfortable rooms, some with fridge and cable TV. Internet and wireless access in the ground-floor café, where breakfast (included in the price) is served. Discounted weekly rates. ⑤

White Lodge 36/8 Soi Kasemsan 1, Thanon Rama I ⓣ02 216 8867 or 215 3041, ⓕ02 216 8228. Cheapest guest house on the soi, with well-maintained, shining white cubicles, a welcoming atmosphere, and good breakfasts at *Sorn's* next door. ③

Expensive

Conrad All Seasons Place, 87 Thanon Witthayu ⓣ 02 690 9999, ⓦ www.conradhotels.com. A recent addition to the city's luxury hotel scene, which places a high premium on design, aiming to add a cutting edge to traditional Thai style. Bathroom fittings include free-standing baths, glass walls and huge shower heads, and there's an enticing pool, spa, gym and two floodlit tennis courts. Eating options include the modern Chinese *Liu*, a branch of Beijing's hottest restaurant. ⑨

Holiday Mansion Hotel 53 Thanon Witthayu ⓣ 02 255 0099, ⓔ hmtel@ksc.th.com. Handily placed opposite the British Embassy, this hotel's main selling point is its large, attractive swimming pool. The bright and spacious bedrooms are nothing to write home about, but come with cable TV, air-con and hot water. Rates include breakfast. ⑦

Jim's Lodge 125/7 Soi Ruam Rudee, Thanon Ploenchit ⓣ 02 255 3100, ⓦ www.jimslodge.com. In a relatively peaceful residential area, convenient for the British and American embassies, with friendly and helpful staff; offers international standards, including satellite TV and mini-bars, on a smaller scale and at bargain prices (towards the lower end of this price code); no swimming pool, but there is a roof garden with outdoor Jacuzzi. ⑦

Pathumwan Princess Hotel 444 Thanon Phrayathai ⓣ 02 216 3700, ⓦ www.pprincess.com. At the southern end of the Mah Boon Krong (MBK) Shopping Centre, affordable luxury that's recently been refurbished in a crisp, modern style and is popular with families and businessmen. Facilities run to Korean and Japanese restaurants, a large, saltwater swimming pool with hot and cold Jacuzzis, a health spa and a huge fitness club (including jogging track and squash and tennis courts). ⑧

Reflections 81 Soi Ari (aka Thanon Phaholyothin Soi 7), between sois 2 and 3 ⓣ 02 270 3344, ⓦ www.reflections-thai.com. An oasis of kitsch in a neighbourhood busy with food stalls and office workers, the *Reflections* compound is centred around an intriguingly camp-pop hotel plus a similarly styled gift shop and restaurant. The 28 rooms in the hotel come in two sizes and all have air-con, but otherwise each is entirely individual, as every room was designed by a different artist. You might choose, for example, to stay in the all-pink "princess" room, in the one that evokes beachfront life, or in the one influenced by Parisian boho style (browse the website to see the full range). Though it's outside main shopping and entertainment districts, the hotel is just 5 minutes' walk from BTS Ari, five stops north of Siam Square and three stops south of Chatuchak Weekend Market; see map on p.92. Has a spa and pool. ⑧

Siam City Hotel 477 Thanon Sri Ayutthaya ⓣ 02 247 0123, ⓦ www.siamhotels.com. Elegant, welcoming luxury hotel on the northern side of downtown (next to Phaya Thai Skytrain station and opposite Suan Pakkad). Rooms are tastefully done out in dark wood and subdued colours, and there's a spa, health club, swimming pool and a comprehensive array of restaurants: Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Italian, international and a bakery. ⑧

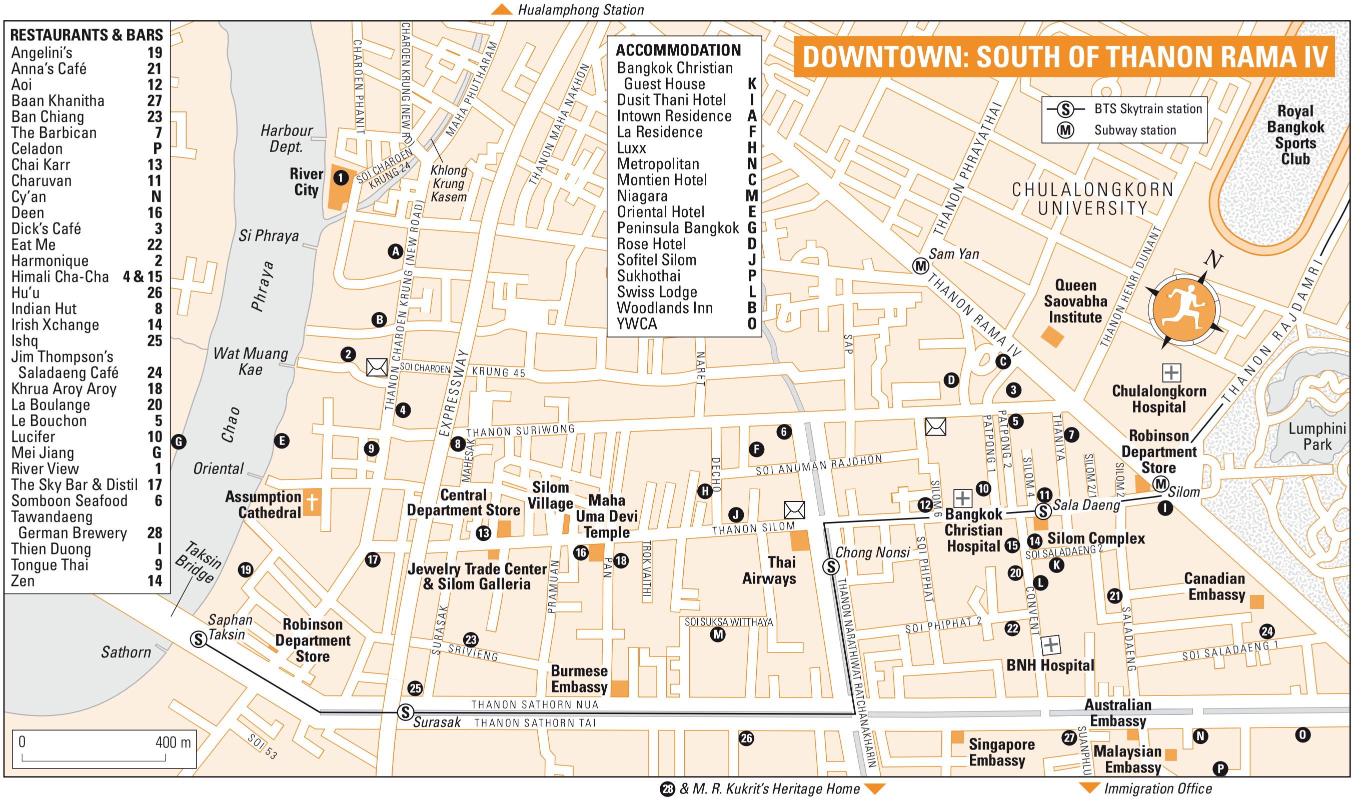
Swissôtel Nai Lert Park 2 Thanon Witthayu ⓣ 02 253 0123, ⓦ www.nailertpark.swissotel.com. The main distinguishing feature of this welcoming, low-rise hotel is its lushly beautiful gardens, overlooked by many of the chic and spacious, balconied bedrooms; set into the grounds are a landscaped swimming pool, tennis courts, squash court and popular spa and health club. Good deli-café, cool bar (see p.172) and Japanese (see p.165), French and Chinese restaurants. ⑨

Downtown: south of Thanon Rama IV

South of Thanon Rama IV, the left bank of the river contains a full cross-section of places to stay. Tucked away at the eastern edge of this area is **Soi Ngam Duphli**, a small ghetto of cheap guest houses that is often choked with traffic escaping the jams on Thanon Rama IV. The neighbourhood is generally on the slide, but is close to Lumphini subway station and a lot handier for the downtown areas and the new airport than Banglamphu.

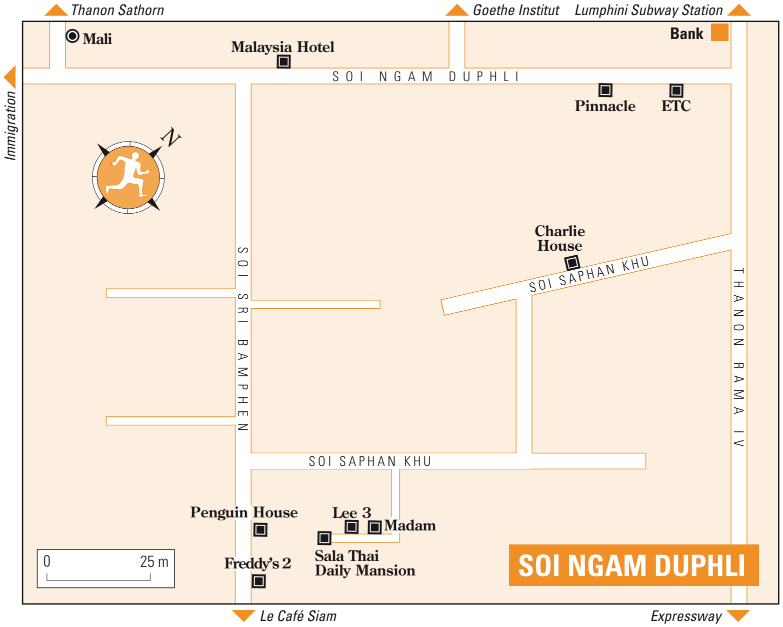
Some medium-range places are scattered between Thanon Rama IV and the river, ranging from the notorious (the *Malaysia*) to the sedate (the *Bangkok Christian Guest House*). The area also lays claim to the capital's biggest selection of top hotels, which are among the most opulent in the world. Traversed by the Skytrain, this area is especially good for eating and nightlife. Staying by the river itself off **Thanon Charoen Krung**, aka **New Road**, has the added advantage of easy access to express boats, which will ferry you upstream to view the treasures of Ratanakosin.

DOWNTOWN: SOUTH OF THANON RAMA IV


Hualamphong Station
BTS Skytrain station
Subway station
N
Royal Bangkok Sports Club
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY
Queen Saovabha Institute
Chulalongkorn Hospital
Lumphini Park
Robinson Department Store
Silom
Sala Daeng
Sam Yan
Bangkok Christian Hospital
Silom Complex
Canadian Embassy
BNH Hospital
Australian Embassy
Malaysian Embassy
Singapore Embassy
Immigration Office
28 & M. R. Kukrit's Heritage Home
Chong Nonsi
Thai Airways
Burmese Embassy
Maha Uma Devi Temple
Silom Village
Central Department Store
Jewelry Trade Center & Silom Galleria
Assumption Cathedral
Oriental
Chao Phraya
Si Phraya
Wat Muang Kae
Harbour Dept.
River City
Khlong Krung Kasem
Taksin Bridge
Saphan Taksin
Robinson Department Store
Sathorn
Surasak
THANON SATHORN NUA
THANON SATHORN TAI
THANON NARATHIWAT RATCHANAKHARIN
THANON SILOM
THANON SURIWONG
THANON RAMA IV
THANON PHRAYATHAI
THANON HENRI DUNANT
THANON RAJDAMRI
THANON MAHA NAKHON
THANON CHAROEN KRUNG (NEW ROAD)
CHAROEN KRUNG (NEW RD)
CHAROEN PHANIT
MAHA PHUTHARAM
SOI CHAROEN KRUNG 24
SOI CHAROEN KRUNG 45
EXPRESSWAY
MAHESAK
SURASAK
SRIVIENG
PRAMUAN
PAN
TROK VAITHI
DECHO
NARET
SAP
SOI ANUMAN RAJDHON
SOI SUKSA WITTHAYA
SOI PHIPHAT
SOI PHIPHAT 2
SILOM 6
PATPONG 1
PATPONG 2
SILOM 4
THANIYA
SILOM 2/1
SILOM 2
SOI SALADAENG 2
CONVENT
SALADAENG
SOI SALADAENG 1
SUANPHLU
SOI 53
0
400 m

RESTAURANTS & BARS	
Angelini's	19
Anna's Café	21
Aoi	12
Baan Khanitha	27
Ban Chiang	23
The Barbican	7
Celadon	P
Chai Karr	13
Charuvan	11
Cy'an	N
Deen	16
Dick's Café	3
Eat Me	22
Harmonique	2
Himali Cha-Cha	4 & 15
Hu'u	26
Indian Hut	8
Irish Xchange	14
Ishq	25
Jim Thompson's Saladaeng Café	24
Khrua Aroy Aroy	18
La Boulange	20
Le Bouchon	5
Lucifer	10
Mei Jiang	G
River View	1
The Sky Bar & Distil	17
Somboon Seafood	6
Tawandaeng German Brewery	28
Thien Duong	I
Tongue Thai	9
Zen	14

ACCOMMODATION	
Bangkok Christian Guest House	K
Dusit Thani Hotel	I
Intown Residence	A
La Residence	F
Luxx	H
Metropolitan	N
Montien Hotel	C
Niagara	M
Oriental Hotel	E
Peninsula Bangkok	G
Rose Hotel	D
Sofitel Silom	J
Sukhothai	P
Swiss Lodge	L
Woodlands Inn	B
YWCA	O


Thanon Sathorn
Goethe Institut
Lumphini Subway Station
Immigration
Mali
Malaysia Hotel
Bank
SOI NGAM DUPHLI
Pinnacle
ETC
N
Charlie House
SOI SAPHAN KHU
SOI SRI BAMPHEN
THANON RAMA IV
SOI SAPHAN KHU
Penguin House
Lee 3
Madam
Sala Thai Daily Mansion
Freddy's 2
0 25 m
SOI NGAM DUPHLI
Le Café Siam
Expressway

Inexpensive

ETC Guest House 5/3 Soi Ngam Duphli Ⓣ02 287 1477–8, Ⓔetc@etc.co.th. Above a branch of the recommended travel agent of the same name, and very handy for Thanon Rama IV, though consequently a little noisy. Friendly, helpful and very clean, catering mainly to Japanese travellers. Rooms come with fans and are further cooled by air-conditioning in the corridors; hot-water bathrooms are either shared or en-suite. Breakfast is included and Internet access is available. ②

Freddy's 2 27/40 Soi Sri Bamphen Ⓣ02 286 7826, Ⓕ02 213 2097. Popular, clean, well-organized guest house with a variety of rooms with shared bathrooms and plenty of comfortable common areas, including a small café and beer garden at the rear. Rather noisy. ①

Lee 3 Guest House 13 Soi Saphan Khu Ⓣ02 679 7045. In an old wooden house, the best of the Lee family of guest houses spread around this and adjoining sois. Decent, quiet and very cheap, with shared cold-water bathrooms. ①

Madam Guest House 11 Soi Saphan Khu Ⓣ02 286 9289, Ⓕ02 213 2087. Cleanish, often cramped, but characterful bedrooms, some with their own cold-water bathrooms, in a warren-like, balconied wooden house. ①

Sala Thai Daily Mansion 15 Soi Saphan Khu Ⓣ02 287 1436, Ⓕ02 677 6880. The pick of the area. A clean and efficiently run place at the end of this quiet, shaded alley, with bright, modern rooms with wall fans, sharing hot-water bathrooms. Especially good for lone travellers, as singles are half the price of doubles. ③

Moderate

Charlie House 1034/36–37 Soi Saphan Khu Ⓣ02 679 8330–1, Ⓦwww.charliehousethailand.com. Good mid-range alternative to the crash-pads of Soi Ngam Duphli: bright, clean lobby restaurant, serving good, reasonably priced food, and small, non-smoking carpeted bedrooms with hot-water bathrooms, air-con and TV, close to Thanon Rama IV. Internet access. ④

Intown Residence 1086/6 Thanon Charoen Krung Ⓣ02 639 0960–2, Ⓔintownbkk@hotmail.com. Clean, welcoming, rather old-fashioned and very good-value hotel sandwiched between shops on the noisy main road (ask for a room away from the street). Slightly chintzy but comfortable rooms, at the lower end of their price code, come with air-con, hot-water bathrooms, mini-bars, satellite TVs and phones. Weekly and monthly discounts available. ④

Malaysia Hotel 54 Soi Ngam Duphli Ⓣ02 679 7127–36, Ⓦwww.malaysiahotelbkk.com. Once a travellers' legend famous for its compendious noticeboard, now better known for its seedy 24hr coffee shop and massage parlour. The accommodation itself is reasonable value though: the rooms are large and have air-con, mini-bars and hot-water bathrooms; some have cable TV. There's a swimming pool (B50/day for non-guests) and Internet access. ④

Niagara 26 Soi Suksa Witthaya, off the south side of Thanon Silom ⓣ02 233 5783, ⓕ02 233 6563. No facilities other than a coffee shop, but the clean bedrooms, with air-con, hot-water bathrooms, TV, telephones and rates at the lower end of this price code, are a snip. ⑤

Penguin House 27/23 Soi Sri Bamphen ⓣ02 679 9991–2, ⓦwww.geocities.com/penguinhouse. New, modern block with a ground-floor café and large, reasonably attractive rooms above, featuring air-con, hot water, cable TV and fridges; ask for one away from the busy road. Discounted monthly rates available. ⑤

Pinnacle 17 Soi Ngam Duphli ⓣ02 287 0111–31, ⓦwww.pinnaclehotels.com. Bland but reliable international-standard place, with rooftop Jacuzzi and fitness centre; rates include breakfast. ⑥

Woodlands Inn 1158/5–7 Soi 32, Thanon Charoen Krung ⓣ02 235 3894, ⓦwww.woodlandsinn.org. Simple but well-run hotel next to the GPO, under South Indian management and popular with travellers from the subcontinent. All rooms have air-con, cable TV and hot-water bathrooms, and there's a good-value South Indian restaurant on the ground floor. ④

YWCA 13 Thanon Sathorn Tai ⓣ02 287 3136, ⓦwww.ywcabangkok.com. Reliable, low-rise accommodation for women in neat standard or spacious deluxe rooms, all with air-con and hot water. Breakfast included. Deeply discounted monthly rates. ⑥

Expensive

Bangkok Christian Guest House 123 Soi 2, Saladaeng, off the eastern end of Thanon Silom ⓣ02 233 2206, ⓦwww.bcgh.org. Well-run, orderly missionary house in a shiny, modern building, where plain but immaculately kept rooms come with air-con and hot-water bathrooms. At the lower end of this price code, with breakfast included. ⑦

Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa 257 Thanon Charoennakorn ⓣ02 476 0022, ⓦwww.marriott.com. A luxury retreat from the frenetic city centre, well to the south on the Thonburi bank, but connected to Taksin Bridge (for the Skytrain and Chao Phraya express boats), 10min away, by hotel ferries every 15min. Arrayed around a highly appealing swimming pool, the tranquil, riverside gardens are filled with vegetation and birdsong, while the stylish and spacious bedrooms come with polished hardwood floors and balconies. There's a fitness centre, a branch of the classy Mandara Spas, and among a wide choice of eateries, a good Japanese teppan-yaki house and a bakery-café. Good value, at the lower end of this price code. ⑨

Dusit Thani Hotel 946 Thanon Rama IV, on the corner of Thanon Silom ⓣ02 236 9999, ⓦwww.dusit.com. Elegant, centrally placed top-class hotel, geared for both business and leisure, with very high standards of service. The hotel is famous for its restaurants, including *Thien Duong* (see p.167) and the French *D'Sens*, which has some spectacular top-floor views. ⑨

La Residence 173/8–9 Thanon Suriwong ⓣ02 266 5400–1, ⓦwww.laresidencebangkok.com. A small, intimate boutique hotel where the tasteful, individually decorated rooms stretch to mini-bars, safes and cable TV. Continental breakfast included. ⑦

Luxx 6/11 Thanon Decho ⓣ02 635 8800, ⓦwww.staywithluxx.com. Welcoming boutique hotel offering a good dose of contemporary style at reasonable prices. Decorated in white, grey and plain, unvarnished teak, the rooms feature DVD players, safes, dressing gowns and cute wooden baths surmounted by outsized shower heads. Continental or American breakfast included. ⑧

Metropolitan 27 Thanon Sathorn Tai ⓣ02 625 3333, ⓦwww.metropolitan.como.bz. The height of chic, minimalist urban living, where the largest standard hotel rooms in the city (the "Metropolitan" rooms) are stylishly decorated in dark wood, creamy Portuguese limestone and lotus-themed contemporary artworks, while Yohji Yamamoto outfits adorn all the staff. There's a very seductive pool, a fine spa, a well-equipped fitness centre with a daily schedule of complimentary classes, ranging from t'ai chi to Pilates, an excellent restaurant, *Cyan* (see p.166), and a fiercely hip private bar. ⑨

Montien Hotel 54 Thanon Surawongse, on the corner of Rama IV ⓣ02 233 7060, ⓦwww.montien.com. Grand, airy and solicitous luxury hotel, with a strongly Thai character, very handily placed for business and nightlife. ⑨

Oriental Hotel 48 Oriental Avenue, off Thanon Charoen Krung ⓣ02 659 9000, ⓦwww.mandarinoriental.com. One of the world's best, this effortlessly stylish riverside hotel boasts immaculate standards of service. ⑨

Peninsula Bangkok 333 Thanon Charoennakorn, Klongsan ⓣ02 861 2888, ⓦwww.peninsula.com. Superb top-class hotel which self-consciously aims to rival the *Oriental* across the river. Service is flawless, the decor stylishly blends traditional and modern Asian design, and every room has a panoramic view of the Chao Phraya. Although it's on the Thonburi side of the river, the hotel operates a shuttle boat across to a pier and reception area by the *Shangri-La Hotel* off Thanon Charoen Krung. ⑨

Rose Hotel 118 Thanon Suriwong ⓣ 02 266 8268–72, ⓦ www.rosehotelbkk.com. Set back from the main road but very handy for the city's nightlife, this thirty-year-old hotel has just been cleverly refurbished: the simple, compact rooms now boast a stylish, retro look, in keeping with the age of the place. The ground-floor public rooms, where breakfast (included in the price) is served, are more elegant again, and a swimming pool is planned. Internet access. Towards the lower end of this price code. ⑦

Sofitel Silom 188 Thanon Silom ⓣ 02 238 1991, ⓦ www.sofitel.com. Towards the quieter end of Thanon Silom, a clever renovation combines contemporary Asian artworks and furnishings with understated French elegance. A wine bar and Mediterranean, Japanese and rooftop Chinese restaurants, as well as a fitness club and small pool, complete the picture. ⑨

Sukhothai 13/3 Thanon Sathorn Tai ⓣ 02 287 0222, ⓦ www.sukhothai.com. The most elegant of Bangkok's top hotels, its decor inspired by the walled city of Sukhothai: low-rise accommodation coolly furnished in silks, teak and granite, around six acres of gardens and lotus ponds. Excellent restaurants including the Thai *Celadon* (see p.166). ⑨

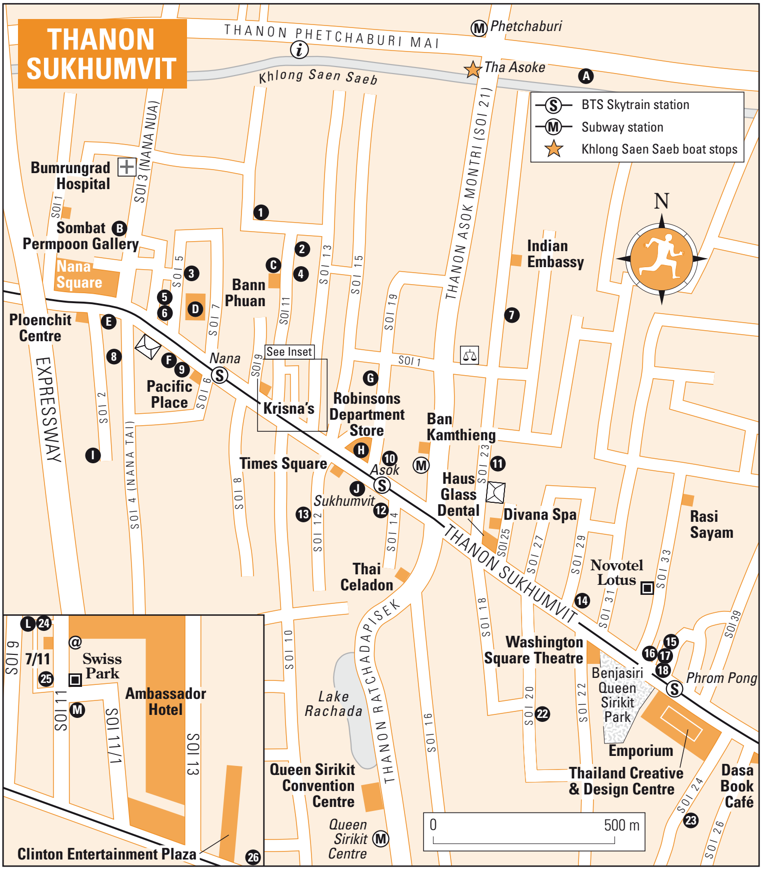
Swiss Lodge 3 Thanon Convent ⓣ 02 233 5345, ⓦ www.swisslodge.com. Swish, friendly, good-value, boutique hotel, with high standards of service, just off Thanon Silom and ideally placed for business and nightlife. *Café Swiss* serves fondue, raclette and all your other Swiss favourites, while the tiny terrace swimming pool confirms the national stereotypes of neatness and clever design. ⑧

Thanon Sukhumvit

Thanon Sukhumvit is Bangkok's longest road – it keeps going east all the way to Cambodia – but for such an important artery it's way too narrow for the volume of traffic that needs to use it, and is further hemmed in by the overhead Skytrain line that runs above its entire course. Packed with high-rise hotels and office blocks, an amazing array of specialist restaurants (from Lebanese to Laotian), tailors, bookstores and stall after stall selling cheap souvenirs and T-shirts, it's a lively place that attracts a high proportion of single male tourists to its enclaves of girlie bars on Soi Nana Tai, Soi Cowboy and the Clinton Entertainment Plaza. But for the most part it's not a seedy area, and is home to many expats and middle-class Thais.

Although this is not the place to come if you're on a tight budget, Sukhumvit has one exceptional mid-priced guest house; its four- and five-star hotels tend to be oriented towards business travellers, but facilities are good and the downtown views from the high-rise rooms a real plus. The best accommodation here is between and along sois 1 to 21; many of the sois are surprisingly quiet, even leafy, and offer a welcome breather from the congested frenzy of Thanon Sukhumvit itself – transport down the longer sois is provided by motorbike-taxi (*mohtoesai*) drivers who wait at the soi's mouth, clad in numbered waistcoats. Advance reservations are recommended during high season.

Staying here, you're well served by the **Skytrain**, which has stops all the way along Thanon Sukhumvit, while the Sukhumvit **subway** stop at the mouth of Soi 21 (Thanon Asok Montri) makes it easy to get to Hualamphong Station and Chinatown. On the downside, you're a long way from the main Ratanakosin sights, and the volume of traffic on Sukhumvit means that travelling by **bus** across town can take an age – if possible, try to travel to and from Thanon Sukhumvit outside rush hour (7–9am & 3–7pm); it's almost as bad in a taxi, which will often take at least an hour to get to Ratanakosin. Useful buses for getting to Ratanakosin include #508 (air-con) and #25 (ordinary); full details of bus routes are given on pp.100–01. Airport Expressbus AE3 from Suvarnabhumi makes stops all the way along Thanon Sukhumvit and public bus #554 runs from Suvarnabhumi to On Nut Skytrain station (see p.94).


THANON SUKHUMVIT
THANON PHETCHABURI MAI
Khlong Saen Saeb
Phetchaburi
Tha Asoke
BTS Skytrain station
Subway station
Khlong Saen Saeb boat stops
N
Thanon Ploenchit
Bumrungrad Hospital
SOI 1
SOI 3 (NANA NUA)
Sombat
Permpoon Gallery
Nana Square
Ploenchit Centre
EXPRESSWAY
SOI 2
SOI 4 (NANA TAI)
SOI 5
SOI 7
SOI 6
Pacific Place
Nana
Bann Phuan
SOI 11
SOI 13
SOI 15
SOI 19
SOI 9
See Inset
Krisna's
Robinsons Department Store
Times Square
SOI 8
Asok
Sukhumvit
SOI 12
SOI 14
Thai Celadon
SOI 10
Lake Rachada
THANON RATCHADAPISEK
Queen Sirikit Convention Centre
Queen Sirikit Centre
SOI 16
THANON ASOK MONTRI (SOI 21)
SOI 1
Ban Kamthieng
SOI 23
Haus Glass Dental
Divana Spa
SOI 25
SOI 27
SOI 29
SOI 31
SOI 33
Indian Embassy
Rasi Sayam
Novotel Lotus
THANON SUKHUMVIT
SOI 18
SOI 20
SOI 22
Washington Square Theatre
Benjasiri Queen Sirikit Park
Emporium
Thailand Creative & Design Centre
Phrom Pong
SOI 39
SOI 24
SOI 26
Dasa Book Café
Ekamai Eastern Bus Terminal, 19, 20, 21 & K
0
500 m
SOI 9
7/11
Swiss Park
SOI 11
SOI 11/1
Ambassador Hotel
SOI 13
Clinton Entertainment Plaza

ACCOMMODATION	
Amari Atrium	A
Amari Boulevard Hotel	D
The Atlanta	I
Federal Hotel	C
Grand Business Inn	M
J.W. Marriott Hotel	E
The Landmark Bangkok	F
Rex Hotel	K
Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit	J
Suk 11	L
SV Guest House	G
Westin Grande Sukhumvit	H
Zenith Hotel	B

RESTAURANTS, BARS & CLUBS	
Al Ferdoss	6
Baan Khanitha	7
The Ball in Hand	8
Ban Rie Coffee	20
Bed Supperclub	2
The Bull's Head	15
Cabbages and Condoms	13
Cheap Charlie's	25
Dosa King	10
Face Bangkok (La Na Thai & Hazara)	21
Gaeng Pa Lerd Rod	17
Gallery 11	24
Gullivers Traveler's Tavern	3
Himali Cha-Cha	17
Le Dalat Indochine	11
Lemongrass	23
Londoner Brew Pub	16
MahaNaga	14
Nipa	9
Pizza Venezia	4
Q Bar	1
Robin Hood	18
Suda Restaurant	12
Tamarind Café	22
Took Lae Dee	5
Vientiane Kitchen (Khrua Vientiane)	19
Yong Lee	26

A much faster way of getting across town is to hop on one of the **longtail boats** that ply the canals: Khlong Saen Saeb, which begins near Democracy Monument at Phan Fah in the west of the city, runs parallel with part of Thanon Sukhumvit and has stops at the northern ends of Soi Nana Nua (Soi 3) and Thanon Asok Montri (Soi 21), from where you can either walk down to Thanon Sukhumvit, or take a motorbike taxi. This reduces the journey between Thanon Sukhumvit and the Banglamphu/Ratanakosin area to about thirty minutes; for more details on boat routes, see p.102.

Inexpensive and moderate

The Atlanta At the far southern end of Soi 2 Ⓣ02 252 1650, Ⓦwww.theatlantahotel.bizland.com. Classic, old-style, five-storey hotel with lots of colonial-era character and some of the cheapest accommodation on Sukhumvit. However, rooms are simple and some are pretty scruffy, though they are all en suite and some have air-con while others have small balconies. There are two swimming pools, Internet access and a left-luggage facility. The hotel restaurant serves an extensive Thai menu, including lots of vegetarian dishes, and shows classic movies set in Asia. Fan ④, air-con ④–⑤

Federal Hotel 27 Soi 11 Ⓣ02 253 0175, Ⓦwww.federalbangkok.com. Efficiently run, mid-sized, old-style hotel at the far end of Soi 11 so there's a feeling of space and a relatively uncluttered skyline; many rooms look out on the poolside seating area, though the cheapest have no window. All rooms have air-con and cable TV; the upstairs ones are smart and good value and worth paying a little extra for. ⑤–⑥

Rex Hotel Between sois 32 and 34 (opposite Soi 49), about 300m west from Thong Lo Skytrain station Exit 2 Ⓣ02 259 0106, Ⓕ02 258 6635. The best-value accommodation close to the Eastern Bus Terminal (one stop on the BTS), this old-fashioned hotel is comfortable and well maintained and has a pool and a restaurant to complement its sizeable air-con rooms, but is too isolated from the best of Sukhumvit for a longer stay. ⑤–⑥

Suk 11 Behind the 7–11 store at 1/3 Soi 11 Ⓣ02 253 5927, Ⓦwww.suk11.com. One of the most unusual and characterful little hotels in Bangkok, this is also the most backpacker-oriented guest house in the area. The interior of the apparently ordinary apartment-style building has been transformed to resemble a village of traditional wooden houses, accessed by a dimly lit plankway that winds past a variety of guest rooms, terraces and lounging areas. The rooms themselves are simple but comfortable and very clean, they're all air-conditioned and some are en suite. In high season, B250 beds in five-person air-con dorms are also available. It's friendly, well run and thoughtfully appointed, keeps informative noticeboards, provides free breakfast, has wi-fi Internet capability and washing machines, stores left luggage (B20/day), and accepts advance reservations via the website. Shared bathroom ④, en suite ⑤

SV Guest House Soi 19 Ⓣ02 253 1747, Ⓕ02 255 7174. Some of the least expensive beds in the area in this long-running, clean and well-maintained guest house. All double rooms have air-con, the cheapest share bathrooms and have no outside window, the best are very good value and have private bathrooms, air-con and cable TV. Shared bathroom ③, en suite ④

Expensive

Amari Atrium 1880 Thanon Phetchaburi Mai Ⓣ02 718 2000–1, Ⓦwww.amari.com. Welcoming, efficiently run and environmentally friendly luxury hotel, earning the government's highest seal of eco-approval. There's a lively range of restaurants and bars, a small but attractive outdoor pool, a well-equipped gym, steam room, sauna and Jacuzzi. Many rooms have been adapted for the disabled and elderly. The hotel's a little out on a limb, but is handy for the subway, boats on Khlong Saen Saeb and TAT's main office, and there's a free shuttle bus to the major shopping centres. ⑨

Amari Boulevard Hotel Soi 5 Ⓣ02 255 2930, Ⓦwww.amari.com. Medium-sized, unpretentious and friendly upmarket tourist hotel. Rooms are comfortably furnished and all enjoy fine views of the Bangkok skyline from their balcony or terrace. There's an attractive rooftop swimming pool and garden terrace which becomes the Thai-food restaurant *Season* in the evenings. ⑧

Grand Business Inn 2/4-2/11 Soi 11 Ⓣ02 254 7981, Ⓦwww.awgroup.com. Good-value mid-range hotel offering 66 large, comfortable, standard-issue air-con rooms, all with bathtubs and cable TV. In a very central location just a few metres from BTS Nana. ⑦

J.W. Marriott Hotel Soi 2 Ⓣ02 656 7700, Ⓦwww.marriotthotels.com. Deluxe hotel, offering comfortable rooms geared towards business travellers, six restaurants (including the *Marriott Cafe*, known for its exceptionally good all-day buffets), a swimming pool, spa and fitness centre. ⑨

The Landmark Bangkok Between sois 4 and 6 Ⓣ02 254 0404 Ⓦwww.landmarkbangkok.com. Although many of its customers are business people, *The Landmark*'s welcoming atmosphere also makes it a favourite with tourists and families. Rooms are of a very high standard without being offputtingly plush, facilities include a rooftop pool, squash court and health club, and there's broadband access in every room. ⑨

Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit Between sois 12 and 14 ⓣ02 649 8888, ⓦwww.sheratongrandesukhumvit.com. Deluxe accommodation in stylishly understated rooms, all of which offer fine views of the cityscape (the honeymoon suites have their own rooftop plunge pools). Facilities include a gorgeous free-form swimming pool and tropical garden on the ninth floor, a spa with a range of treatment plans, the trendy *Basil* Thai restaurant and the *Living Room* bar, which is famous for its jazz singers. Those aged 17 and under stay for free if sharing adults' room. ⑨

Westin Grande Sukhumvit Above Robinson's Department Store, between sois 17 and 19 ⓣ02 651 1000, ⓦwww.westin.com/bangkok. Conveniently located four-star hotel that's aimed at the fashion-conscious business traveller but would suit holidaymakers too. The decor is modish but cheerful, with groovy pale-wood desks, flat-screen TVs and Westin's trademark super-deluxe "heavenly" mattresses. Facilities include several restaurants, a swimming pool, gym and spa, a kids' club and a business centre. Good value for its class. ⑨

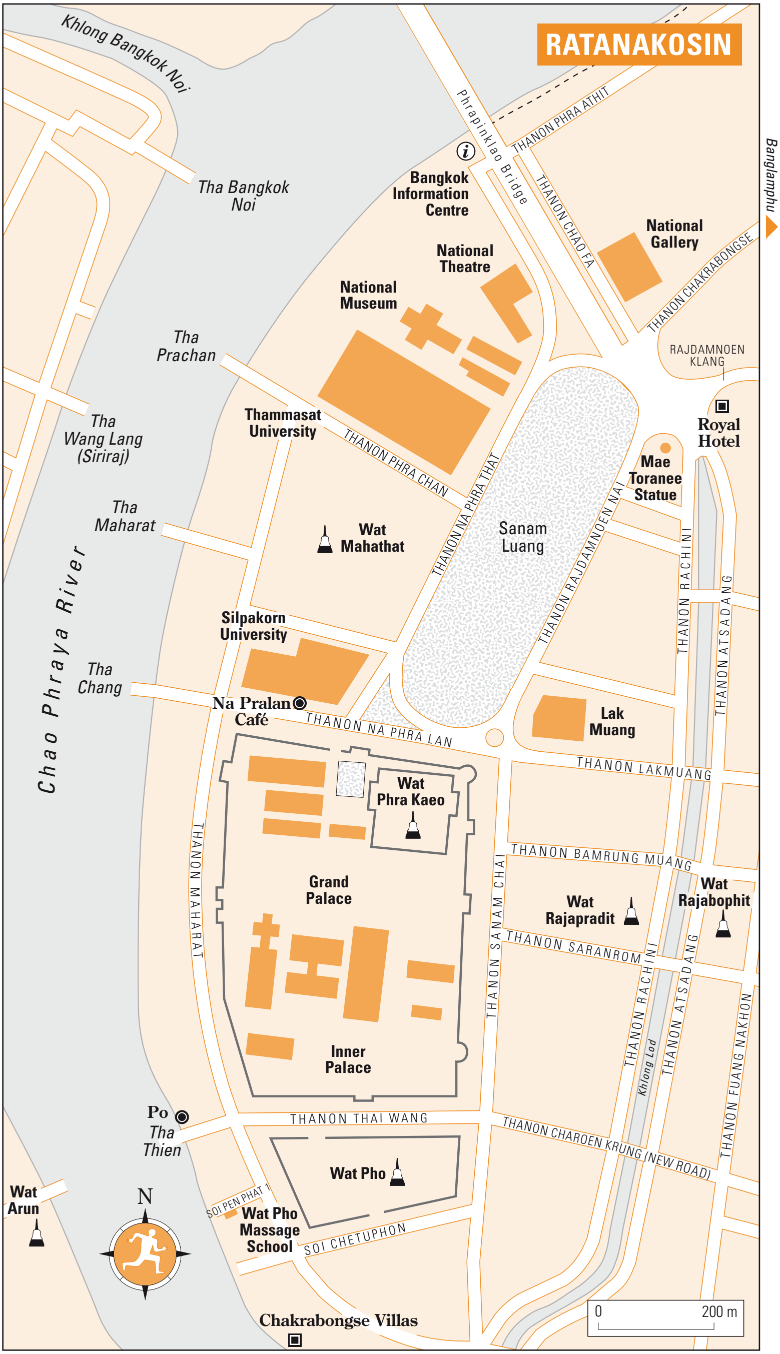
Zenith Hotel 29 Soi 3 ⓣ02 655 4999, ⓦwww.zenith-hotel.com. Central and reasonably smart if fairly bland upper-mid-range option, where the high-rise rooms are large and sleek (all have air-con and TV) and there's a rooftop swimming pool. ⑧

The City

Bangkok is sprawling, chaotic and exhausting: to do it justice and keep your sanity, don't try to do too much in too short a time. The place to start is **Ratanakosin**, the royal island on the east bank of the Chao Phraya, where the city's most important and extravagant sights are to be found. On the edges of this enclave, the area around the landmark **Democracy Monument** includes some interesting and quirky religious architecture, a contrast with the attractions of neighbouring **Chinatown**, whose markets pulsate with the much more aggressive business of making money. Quieter and more European in ambience are the stately buildings of the new royal district of **Dusit**, 2km northeast of Democracy Monument. Very little of old Bangkok remains, but the back canals of **Thonburi**, across the river from Ratanakosin and Chinatown, retain a traditional feel quite at odds with the modern high-rise jungle of **downtown Bangkok**, which has evolved across on the eastern perimeter of the city and can take an hour to reach by bus from Ratanakosin. It's here that you'll find the best shops, bars, restaurants and nightlife, as well as a handful of worthwhile sights. Greater Bangkok now covers an area some 30km in diameter; though unsightly urban development predominates, an expedition to **the outskirts** is made worthwhile by several museums and the city's largest market, **Chatuchak**.

Ratanakosin

When Rama I developed **Ratanakosin** as his new capital in 1782, after the sacking of Ayutthaya and a temporary stay across the river in Thonburi, he paid tribute to its precursor by imitating Ayutthaya's layout and architecture – he even shipped the building materials downstream from the ruins of the old city. Like Ayutthaya, the new capital was sited for protection beside a river and turned into an artificial island by the construction of defensive canals, with a central **Grand Palace** and adjoining royal temple, **Wat Phra Kaeo**, fronted by an open cremation field, **Sanam Luang**; the Wang Na (Palace of the Second King), now doing service as the **National Museum**, was also built at this time. **Wat Pho**, which predates



RATANAKOSIN

Khlong Bangkok Noi
Tha Bangkok Noi
Phrapinklao Bridge
THANON PHRA ATHIT
Bangkok Information Centre
THANON CHAO FA
National Gallery
Banglamphu
National Theatre
National Museum
THANON CHAKRABONGSE
RAJDAMNOEN KLANG
Tha Prachan
Tha Wang Lang (Siriraj)
Thammasat University
THANON PHRA CHAN
Royal Hotel
Mae Toranee Statue
Tha Maharat
Wat Mahathat
THANON NA PHRA THAT
Sanam Luang
THANON RAJDAMNOEN NAI
THANON RACHINI
THANON ATSADANG
Chao Phraya River
Silpakorn University
Tha Chang
Na Pralan Café
THANON NA PHRA LAN
Lak Muang
THANON LAKMUANG
Wat Phra Kaeo
THANON MAHARAT
Grand Palace
THANON BAMRUNG MUANG
THANON SANAM CHAI
Wat Rajapradit
Wat Rajabophit
THANON SARANROM
Inner Palace
Khlong Lod
THANON FUANG NAKHON
Po
Tha Thien
THANON THAI WANG
THANON CHAROEN KRUNG (NEW ROAD)
Wat Pho
Wat Arun
N
SOI PEN PHAT 1
Wat Pho Massage School
SOI CHETUPHON
Chakrabongse Villas
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the capital's founding, was further embellished by Rama I's successors, who have consolidated Ratanakosin's pre-eminence by building several grand European-style palaces (now housing government institutions); Wat Mahathat, the most important centre of Buddhist learning in Southeast Asia; the National Theatre; and Thammasat and Silpakorn universities.

Bangkok has expanded eastwards away from the river, leaving the Grand Palace a good 5km from the city's commercial heart, and the royal family have long since moved their residence to Dusit, but Ratanakosin remains the ceremonial centre of the whole kingdom – so much so that it feels as if it might sink into the boggy ground under the weight of its own mighty edifices. The heavy, stately feel is lightened by traditional shophouses and noisy **markets** along the riverside strip and by **Sanam Luang**, still used for cremations and royal ceremonies, but also functioning as a popular open park and the hub of the modern city's bus system. Despite containing several of the country's main sights, the area is busy enough in its own right not to have become a swarming tourist zone, and strikes a neat balance between liveliness and grandeur.

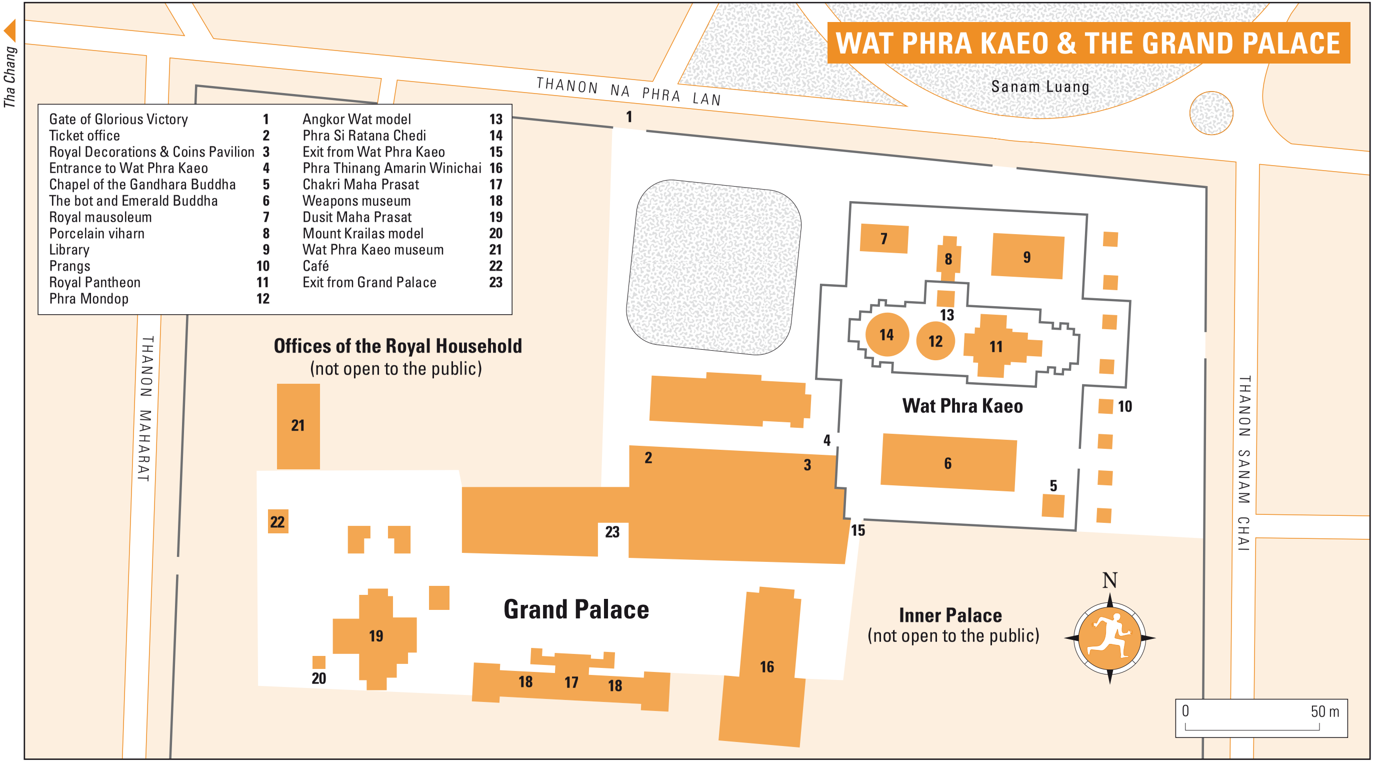
Ratanakosin is within easy walking distance of Banglamphu, but is best approached from the river, via the **express-boat piers** of Tha Chang (the former bathing place of the royal elephants, which gives access to the Grand Palace) or Tha Thien (for Wat Pho). A **word of warning**: when you're heading for the Grand Palace or Wat Pho, you may well be approached by someone pretending to be a student or an official, who will tell you that the sight is closed when it's not, because they want to lead you on a shopping trip. Although the opening hours of the Grand Palace are sometimes erratic because of state occasions, it's far better to put in a bit of extra legwork and check it out for yourself.

Wat Phra Kaeo and the Grand Palace

Hanging together in a precarious harmony of strangely beautiful colours and shapes, **Wat Phra Kaeo** (Ⓦwww.palaces.thai.net) is the apogee of Thai religious art and the holiest Buddhist site in the country, housing the most important image, the **Emerald Buddha**. Built as the private royal temple, Wat Phra Kaeo occupies the northeast corner of the huge **Grand Palace**, whose official opening in 1785 marked the founding of the new capital and the rebirth of the Thai nation after the Burmese invasion. Successive kings have all left their mark here, and the palace complex now covers 61 acres, though very little apart from the wat is open to tourists.

The only **entrance** to the complex in 2km of crenellated walls is the Gate of Glorious Victory in the middle of the north side, on Thanon Na Phra Lan. This brings you onto a driveway with a tantalizing view of the temple's glittering spires on the left and the dowdy buildings of the Offices of the Royal Household on the right: this is the powerhouse of the kingdom's ceremonial life, providing everything down to chairs and catering, even lending an urn when someone of rank dies (a textile museum under the auspices of the queen is scheduled to open among these buildings, perhaps in 2007). Turn left at the end of the driveway for the ticket office and entrance turnstiles: **admission** to Wat Phra Kaeo and the palace is B250 (daily 8.30am–3.30pm, palace halls and weapons museum closed Sat & Sun; 2hr personal audioguide B200, with passport or credit card as surety), which includes a free brochure and map, as well as admission (within seven days) to the Vimanmek Palace in the Dusit area (see p.148). As it's Thailand's most sacred site, you have to show respect by **dressing in smart clothes** – no vests, shorts, see-through clothes, sarongs, miniskirts or fisherman's trousers – but if your rucksack won't stretch that far, head for the office to the right just inside the Gate of

WAT PHRA KAEO & THE GRAND PALACE


Tha Chang
THANON NA PHRA LAN
Sanam Luang
THANON MAHARAT
THANON SANAM CHAI
Offices of the Royal Household
(not open to the public)
Wat Phra Kaeo
Grand Palace
Inner Palace
(not open to the public)
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23

Gate of Glorious Victory	1	Angkor Wat model	13
Ticket office	2	Phra Si Ratana Chedi	14
Royal Decorations & Coins Pavilion	3	Exit from Wat Phra Kaeo	15
Entrance to Wat Phra Kaeo	4	Phra Thinang Amarin Winichai	16
Chapel of the Gandhara Buddha	5	Chakri Maha Prasat	17
The bot and Emerald Buddha	6	Weapons museum	18
Royal mausoleum	7	Dusit Maha Prasat	19
Porcelain viharn	8	Mount Krailas model	20
Library	9	Wat Phra Kaeo museum	21
Prangs	10	Café	22
Royal Pantheon	11	Exit from Grand Palace	23
Phra Mondop	12		

Glorious Victory, where suitable garments can be provided (free) as long as you leave some identification (passport or driver's licence) as surety or pay a deposit of B100 per item.

Wat Phra Kaeo

Entering the temple is like stepping onto a lavishly detailed stage set, from the immaculate flagstones right up to the gaudy roofs. Although it receives hundreds of foreign sightseers and at least as many Thai pilgrims every day, the temple, which has no monks in residence, maintains an unnervingly sanitized look, as if it were built only yesterday. Its jigsaw of structures can seem complicated at first, but the basic layout is straightforward: the turnstiles in the west wall open onto the back of the bot, which contains the Emerald Buddha; to the left, the upper terrace runs parallel to the north side of the bot, while the whole temple compound is surrounded by arcaded walls, decorated with extraordinary murals of scenes from the *Ramayana*.

The approach to the bot

Immediately inside the turnstiles, you're confronted by six-metre tall *yaksha*, gaudy demons from the *Ramayana*, who watch over the Emerald Buddha from every gate of the temple and ward off evil spirits. Less threatening is the toothless old codger, cast in bronze and sitting on a plinth by the back wall of the bot, who represents a Hindu hermit credited with inventing yoga and herbal medicine. In front of him is a large grinding stone where, previously, herbal practitioners could come to grind their ingredients – with enhanced powers, of course. Skirting around the bot, you'll reach its **main entrance** on the eastern side, in front of which stands a cluster of grey **statues**, which have a strong Chinese feel: next to Kuan Im, the Chinese goddess of mercy, are a sturdy pillar topped by a lotus flower, which Bangkok's Chinese community presented to Rama IV during his 27 years as a monk; and two handsome cows which commemorate Rama I's birth in the Year of the Cow. Worshippers make their offerings to the Emerald Buddha in among the statues, where they can look at the image through the open doors of the bot without messing up its pristine interior with candle wax and joss-stick ash.

Nearby, in the southeastern corner of the temple precinct, look out for the beautiful country scenes painted in gold and blue on the doors of the **Chapel of the Gandhara Buddha**, a building which was crucial to the old royal rainmaking ritual and which is still used during the Royal Ploughing Ceremony (see p.55). Adorning the roof are thousands of nagas (serpents), symbolizing water; inside the locked chapel, among the paraphernalia used in the ritual, is kept the Gandhara Buddha, a bronze image in the gesture of calling down the rain with its right hand, while cupping the left to catch it. In times of drought the king would order a week-long rainmaking ceremony to be conducted, during which he was bathed regularly and kept away from the opposite sex while Buddhist monks and Hindu Brahmins chanted continuously.

The bot and the Emerald Buddha

The **bot**, the largest building of the temple, is one of the few original structures left at Wat Phra Kaeo, though it has been augmented so often it looks like the work of a wildly inspired child. Eight *sema* stones mark the boundary of the consecrated area around the bot, each sheltering in a psychedelic fairy castle, joined by a low wall decorated with Chinese porcelain tiles, which depict delicate landscapes. The walls of the bot itself, sparkling with gilt and coloured glass, are supported by 112 golden garudas (birdmen) holding nagas, representing the god Indra saving the world by slaying the serpent-cloud that had swallowed up all the water. The symbolism reflects the king's traditional role as a rain-maker.

Inside the bot, a nine-metre-high pedestal supports the tiny **Emerald Buddha**, a figure whose mystique draws pilgrims from all over Thailand – as well as politicians accused of corruption, who traditionally come here to publicly swear their innocence. Here especially you must act with respect, sitting with your feet pointing away from the Buddha. The spiritual power of the sixty-centimetre jadeite image derives from its legendary past. Reputed to have been created in Sri Lanka, it was discovered when lightning cracked open an ancient chedi in Chiang Rai in the early fifteenth century. The image was then moved around the north, dispensing miracles wherever it went, before being taken to Laos for two hundred years. As it was believed to bring great fortune to its possessor, the future Rama I snatched it back when he captured Vientiane in 1779, installing it at the heart of his new capital as a talisman for king and country.

The Emerald Buddha has three costumes, one for each season: the crown and ornaments of an Ayutthayan king for the hot season; a gilt monastic robe dotted with blue enamel for the rainy season, when the monks retreat into the temples; and a full-length gold shawl to wrap up in for the cool season. To this day it's the job of the king himself to ceremonially change the Buddha's costumes – though in recent years, due to the present king's age, the Crown Prince has conducted proceedings. (The Buddha was granted a new set of these three costumes in 1997: the old set is now in the Wat Phra Kaeo Museum – see p.130 – while the two costumes of the new set that are not in use are put on display among the blinding glitter of crowns and jewels in the Royal Decorations and Coins Pavilion, which lies between the ticket office and the entrance to Wat Phra Kaeo.) Among the paraphernalia in front of the pedestal is the tiny, black Victory Buddha, which Rama I always carried with him into war for luck.

The upper terrace

The eastern end of the **upper terrace** is taken up with the **Prasat Phra Thep Bidorn**, known as the **Royal Pantheon**, a splendid hash of styles. The pantheon has its roots in the Khmer concept of *devaraja*, or the divinity of kings: inside are bronze and gold statues, precisely life-size, of all the kings since Bangkok became the Thai capital. The building is open only on special occasions, such as Chakri Day (April 6), when the dynasty is commemorated.

From here you get the best view of the **royal mausoleum**, the **porcelain viharn** and the **library** to the north (all of which are closed to the public), and, running along the east side of the temple, a row of eight bullet-like **prangs**, each of which has a different nasty ceramic colour. Described as "monstrous vegetables" by Somerset Maugham, they represent, from north to south, the Buddha, Buddhist scripture, the monkhood, the nunhood, the Buddhas who attained enlightenment but did not preach, previous emperors, the Bodhisattva and the future Buddha.

In the middle of the terrace, dressed in deep-green glass mosaics, the **Phra Mondop** was built by Rama I to house the *Tripitaka*, or Buddhist scripture. It's famous for the mother-of-pearl cabinet and solid-silver mats inside, but is never open. Four tiny **memorials** at each corner of the mondop show the symbols of each of the nine Chakri kings, from the ancient crown representing Rama I to the present king's sun symbol, while the bronze statues surrounding the memorials portray each king's lucky white elephants, labelled by name and pedigree. A contribution of Rama IV, on the north side of the mondop, is a **scale model of Angkor Wat**, the prodigious Cambodian temple, which during his reign (1851–68) was under Thai rule. At the western end of the terrace, you can't miss the golden dazzle of the **Phra Si Ratana Chedi**, which Rama IV erected to enshrine a piece of the Buddha's breastbone.

The murals

Extending for over a kilometre in the arcades that run inside the wat walls, the **murals of the Ramayana** depict every blow of this ancient story of the triumph of good over evil, using the vibrant buildings of the temple itself as backdrops, and setting them off against the subdued colours of richly detailed landscapes. Because of the damaging humidity, none of the original work of Rama I's time survives: maintenance is a never-ending process, so you'll always find an artist working on one of the scenes. The story is told in 178 panels, labelled and numbered in Thai only, starting in the middle of the northern side: in the first episode, a hermit, while out ploughing, finds the baby Sita, the heroine, floating in a gold urn on a lotus leaf and brings her to the city. Panel 109 shows the climax of the story, when Rama, the hero, kills the ten-headed demon Totsagan (Ravana), and the ladies of the enemy city weep at the demon's death. Panel 110 depicts his elaborate funeral procession, and in 113 you can see the funeral fair, with acrobats, sword-jugglers and tightrope-walkers. In between, Sita – Rama's wife – has to walk on fire to prove that she has been faithful during her fourteen years of imprisonment by Totsagan. If you haven't the stamina for the long walk round, you could sneak a look at the end of the story, to the left of the first panel, where Rama holds a victory parade and distributes thank-you gifts.

The palace buildings

The exit in the southwest corner of Wat Phra Kaeo brings you to the palace proper, a vast area of buildings and gardens, of which only the northern edge is on show to the public. Though the king now lives in the Chitrlada Palace in Dusit, the Grand Palace is still used for state receptions and official ceremonies, during which there is no public access to any part of the palace; in addition, the weapons museum and the interiors of the Phra Thinang Amarin Winichai and the Dusit Maha Prasat are closed at weekends.

Phra Maha Monthien

Coming out of the temple compound, you'll first of all see to your right a beautiful Chinese gate covered in innumerable tiny porcelain tiles. Extending in a straight line behind the gate is the **Phra Maha Monthien**, which was the grand residential complex of earlier kings.

Only the **Phra Thinang Amarin Winichai**, the main audience hall at the front of the complex, is open to the public. The supreme court in the era of the absolute monarchy, it nowadays serves as the venue for the king's birthday speech; dominating the hall is the *busbok*, an open-sided throne with a spired roof, floating on a boat-shaped base. The rear buildings are still used for the most important part of the elaborate coronation ceremony, and each new king is supposed to spend a night there to show solidarity with his forefathers.

Chakri Maha Prasat and the Inner Palace

Next door you can admire the facade of the "farang with a Thai hat", as the **Chakri Maha Prasat** is nicknamed. Rama V, whose portrait you can see over its entrance, employed an English architect to design a purely Neoclassical residence, but other members of the royal family prevailed on the king to add the three Thai spires. This used to be the site of the elephant stables: the large red tethering posts are still there and the bronze elephants were installed as a reminder. The building displays the emblem of the Chakri dynasty on its gable, which has a trident (*ri*) coming out of a *chak*, a discus with a sharpened rim. The only part of the Chakri Maha Prasat open to the public is the **weapons museum**, which occupies two rooms on the ground floor on either side of the grand main entrance, and houses a forgettable display of hooks, pikes, tridents, guns and cannon.

The **Inner Palace** (closed to the public), which used to be the king's harem, lies behind the gate on the left-hand side of the Chakri Maha Prasat. The harem was a town in itself, with shops, law courts and a police force for the huge all-female population: as well as the current queens, the minor wives and their servants, this was home to the daughters and consorts of former kings, and the daughters of the aristocracy who attended the harem's finishing school. Today, the Inner Palace houses a school of cooking, fruit-carving and other domestic sciences for well-bred young Thais.

Dusit Maha Prasat

On the western side of the courtyard, the delicately proportioned **Dusit Maha Prasat**, an audience hall built by Rama I, epitomizes traditional Thai architecture. Outside, the soaring tiers of its red, gold and green roof culminate in a gilded *mongkut*, a spire shaped like the king's crown, which symbolizes the 33 Buddhist levels of perfection. Each tier of the roof bears a typical *chofa*, a slender, stylized bird's-head finial, and several *hang hong* (swans' tails), which represent three-headed nagas. Inside, you can still see the original throne, the **Phra Ratcha Banlang Pradap Muk**, a masterpiece of mother-of-pearl inlaid work. When a senior member of the royal family dies, the hall is used for the lying-in-state: the body, embalmed and seated in a huge sealed urn, is placed in the west transept, waiting up to two years for an auspicious day to be cremated.

To the right and behind the Dusit Maha Prasat rises a strange model mountain, decorated with fabulous animals and topped by a castle and prang. It represents **Mount Krailas**, a version of Mount Meru, the centre of the Hindu universe, and was built as the site of the royal tonsure ceremony. In former times, Thai children had shaved heads, except for a tuft on the crown, which, between the age of five and eight, was cut in a Hindu initiation rite to welcome adolescence. For the royal children, the rite was an elaborate ceremony that sometimes lasted five days, culminating with the king's cutting of the hair knot. The child was then bathed at the model Krailas, in water representing the original river of the universe flowing down the central mountain.

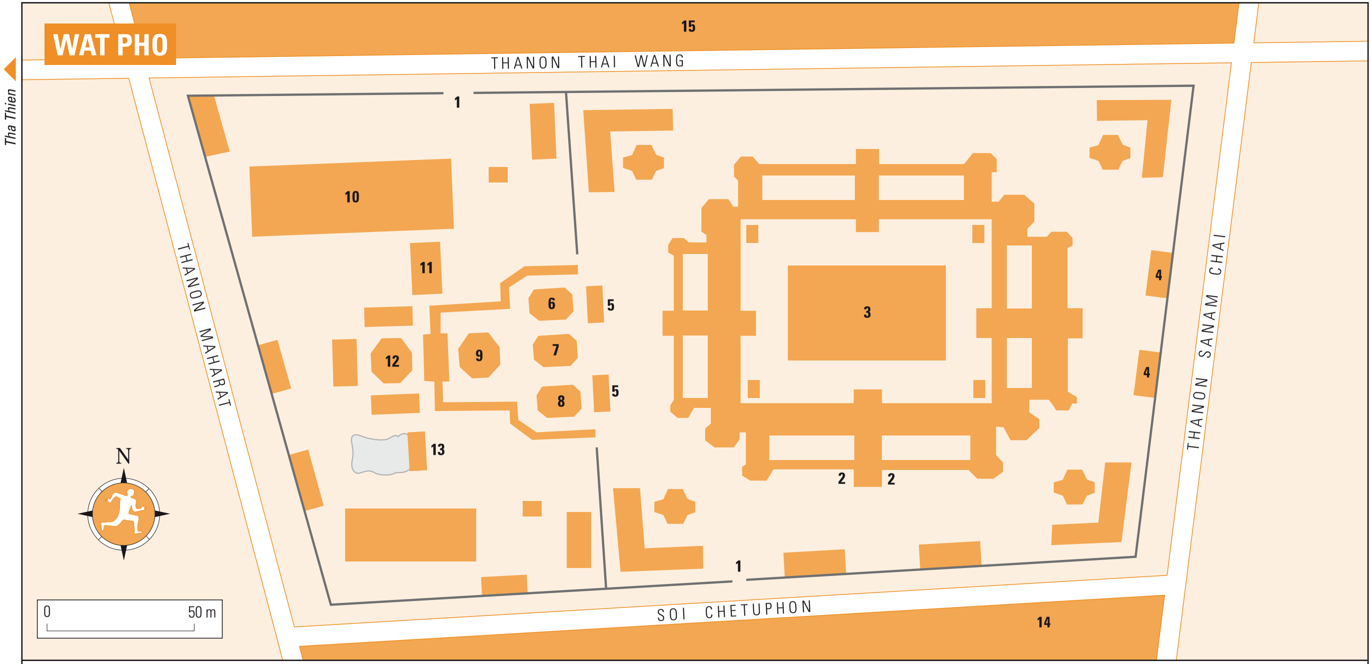
The Wat Phra Kaeo Museum

In the nineteenth-century Royal Mint in front of the Dusit Maha Prasat – next to a small, basic **café** and an incongruous hair salon – the **Wat Phra Kaeo Museum** houses a mildly interesting collection of artefacts associated with the Emerald Buddha along with architectural elements rescued from the Grand Palace grounds during restoration in the 1980s. Highlights include the bones of various kings' white elephants, and upstairs, the Emerald Buddha's original costumes and two useful scale models of the Grand Palace, one as it is now, the other as it was when first built. Also on the first floor stands the grey stone slab of the Manangasila Seat, where Ramkhamhaeng, the great thirteenth-century king of Sukhothai, is said to have sat and taught his subjects. It was discovered in 1833 by Rama IV during his monkhood and brought to Bangkok, where Rama VI used it as the throne for his coronation.

Wat Pho

Where Wat Phra Kaeo may seem too perfect and shrink-wrapped for some, **Wat Pho** (daily 8.30am–6pm; B20; personal guides available, charging B200/300/400 for 1, 2 or 3 visitors; ⓦwww.watpho.com), covering twenty acres to the south of

WAT PHO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Visitors' entrances	**1**
Entrances to Bot	**2**
Bot	**3**
Massage Pavilions	**4**
Traditional Medicine Pavilions	**5**
Rama II Chedi	**6**
Phra Si Sanphet Chedi	**7**
Rama III Chedi	**8**
Rama IV Chedi	**9**
Chapel of the Reclining Buddha	**10**
Chinese Pavilion	**11**
Library	**12**
European Pavilion	**13**
Monks' Quarters	**14**
Grand Palace	**15**

the Grand Palace, is lively and shambolic, a complex arrangement of lavish structures which jostle with classrooms, basketball courts and a turtle pond. Busloads of tourists shuffle in and out of the **north entrance**, stopping only to gawp at the colossal Reclining Buddha, but you can avoid the worst of the crowds by using the **main entrance** on Soi Chetuphon to explore the huge compound, where you're likely to be approached by friendly young monks wanting to practise their English.

Wat Pho is the oldest temple in Bangkok and older than the city itself, having been founded in the seventeenth century under the name Wat Photaram. Foreigners have stuck to the contraction of this old name, even though Rama I, after enlarging the temple, changed the name in 1801 to Wat Phra Chetuphon, which is how it is generally known to Thais. The temple had another major overhaul in 1832, when Rama III built the chapel of the Reclining Buddha, and turned the temple into a public centre of learning by decorating the walls and pillars with inscriptions and diagrams on subjects such as history, literature, animal husbandry and astrology. Dubbed Thailand's first university, the wat is still an important centre for traditional medicine, notably **Thai massage**, which is used against all kinds of illnesses, from backaches to viruses. Excellent massages are available in the ramshackle buildings on the east side of the main compound; allow two hours for the full works (B300/hr; foot reflexology massage B300/45min). Wat Pho's massage school also conducts thirty-hour training courses in English, over a five- to ten-day period, costing B7000, as well as foot-massage courses for B5500; courses, as well as air-conditioned massages, are held in new premises just outside the temple, at 392/25–28 Soi Pen Phat 1, Thanon Maharat (Ⓣ02 221 3686 or Ⓦwww.watpomassage.com for more information).

The eastern courtyard

The main entrance on Soi Chetuphon is one of a series of sixteen monumental gates around the main compound, each guarded by stone **giants**, many of them comic Westerners in wide-brimmed hats – ships which exported rice to China would bring these statues back as ballast.

The entrance brings you into the eastern half of the main complex, where a courtyard of structures radiates from the bot in a disorientating symmetry. To get to the bot, the principal congregation and ordination hall, turn right and cut through the two surrounding cloisters, which are lined with hundreds of Buddha images. The elegant **bot** has beautiful teak doors decorated with mother-of-pearl, showing stories from the *Ramayana* in minute detail. Look out also for the stone bas-reliefs around the base of the bot, which narrate a longer version of the *Ramayana* in 152 action-packed panels. The plush interior has a well-proportioned altar on which ten statues of disciples frame a graceful, Ayutthayan Buddha image containing the remains of Rama I, the founder of Bangkok (Rama IV placed them there so that the public could worship him at the same time as the Buddha).

Back outside the entrance to the double cloister, keep your eyes open for a miniature mountain covered in statues of naked men in tall hats who appear to be gesturing rudely: they are *rishis* (hermits), demonstrating various positions of healing massage. Skirting the southwestern corner of the cloisters, you'll come to two pavilions between the eastern and western courtyards, which display plaques inscribed with the precepts of traditional medicine, as well as anatomical pictures showing the different pressure points and the illnesses that can be cured by massaging them.

The western courtyard

Among the 99 chedis strewn about the grounds, the four **great chedis** in the western courtyard stand out as much for their covering of garish tiles as for their size. The central chedi is the oldest, erected by Rama I to hold the remains of the most sacred Buddha image of Ayutthaya, the Phra Si Sanphet. Later, Rama III built the chedi to the north for the ashes of Rama II and the chedi to the south to hold his own remains; Rama IV built the fourth, with bright blue tiles, though its purpose is uncertain.

In the northwest corner of the courtyard stands the chapel of the **Reclining Buddha**, a 45-metre-long gilded statue of plaster-covered brick which depicts the Buddha entering Nirvana, a common motif in Buddhist iconography. The chapel is only slightly bigger than the statue – you can't get far enough away to take in anything but a surreal close-up view of the beaming five-metre smile. As for the feet, the vast black soles are beautifully inlaid with delicate mother-of-pearl showing the 108 *lakshanas*, or auspicious signs, which distinguish the true Buddha. Along one side of the statue are 108 bowls which will bring you good luck and a long life if you put a coin in each.

Wat Mahathat

On Sanam Luang's western side, with its main entrance on Thanon Maharat, **Wat Mahathat** (daily 9am–5pm; free), founded in the eighteenth century, provides a welcome respite from the surrounding tourist hype, and a chance to engage with the eager monks studying at **Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University** here. As the nation's centre for the Mahanikai monastic sect (where Rama IV spent 24

△ *Rishi* demonstrating yoga massage, Wat Pho years as a monk before becoming king in 1851), and housing one of the two Buddhist universities in Bangkok, the wat buzzes with purpose. It's this activity, and the chance of interaction and participation, rather than any special architectural features, which make a visit so rewarding. The many university-attending monks at the wat are friendly and keen to practise their English, and are more than likely to approach you: diverting topics might range from the poetry of Dylan Thomas to English football results gleaned from the BBC World Service.

Situated in Section Five of the wat is its **Vipassana Meditation Centre**, where sitting and walking meditation practice is available in English (daily 7–10am, 1–4pm & 6–8pm; Ⓣ02 222 6011 or 623 5613 or go to Ⓦwww.section-5.org for further information). Participants generally stay in the simple surroundings of the meditation building itself (donation requested), and must wear white clothes (available to rent at the centre) and observe the eight main Buddhist precepts (see p.526). Talks in English on meditation and Buddhism are held here every evening (8–9pm), as well as at the International Buddhist Meditation Centre (Room 106 or 209; Ⓣ02 623 5881, Ⓦwww.mcu.ac.th/ibmc) in the Mahachulalongkorn University building on the second and fourth Saturdays of every month (3–5pm).

The National Museum

Near the northwest corner of Sanam Luang, the **National Museum** (Wed–Sun 9am–4pm; B40 including free leaflet with map; Ⓦwww.thailandmuseum.com) houses a colossal hoard of Thailand's chief artistic riches, ranging from sculptural treasures in the north and south wings, through bizarre decorative objects in the older buildings, to outlandish funeral chariots and the exquisite Buddhaisawan Chapel, as well as occasionally staging worthwhile temporary exhibitions (details on Ⓣ02 224 1333). It's worth making time for the free **guided tours in English** (Wed & Thurs 9.30am): they're generally entertaining and their explication of the choicest exhibits provides a good introduction to Thai religion and culture. By the ticket office are a bookshop and a pleasant, air-conditioned **café**, serving drinks, sandwiches and cakes, while the **restaurant** inside the museum grounds, by the funeral chariots building, dishes up decent, inexpensive Thai food.

The first building you'll come to near the ticket office houses an informative overview of the history of Thailand, including a small archeological gem: a black stone **inscription**, credited to King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai, which became the first capital of the Thai nation (c.1278–99) under his rule. Discovered in 1833 by the future Rama IV, it's the oldest extant inscription using the Thai alphabet. This, combined with the description it records of prosperity and piety in Sukhothai's Golden Age, has made the stone a symbol of Thai nationhood.

The main collection: southern building

At the back of the compound, two large modern buildings, flanking an old converted palace, house the museum's **main collection**, kicking off on the ground floor of the **southern building**. Look out here for some historic sculptures from the rest of Asia, including one of the earliest representations of the Buddha, from Gandhara in northwest India. Alexander the Great left a garrison at Gandhara, which explains why the image is in the style of Classical Greek sculpture: for example, the *ushnisha*, the supernatural bump on the top of the head, which symbolizes the Buddha's intellectual and spiritual power, is rationalized into a bun of thick, wavy hair.

Upstairs, the **prehistory** room displays axe heads and spear points from Ban Chiang in the northeast of Thailand, one of the earliest Bronze Age cultures ever discovered. Alongside are many roughly contemporaneous metal artefacts from

Kanchanaburi province, as well as some excellent examples of the developments of Ban Chiang's famous pottery. In the adjacent **Dvaravati** room (S7; sixth to eleventh centuries), the pick of the stone and terracotta Buddhas is a small head in smooth, pink clay, whose downcast eyes and faintly smiling full lips typify the serene look of this era. At the far end of the first floor, you can't miss a voluptuous Javanese statue of elephant-headed Ganesh, Hindu god of wisdom and the arts, which, being the symbol of the Fine Arts Department, is always freshly garlanded. As Ganesh is known as the clearer of obstacles, Hindus always worship him before other gods, so by tradition he has grown fat through getting first choice of the offerings – witness his trunk jammed into a bowl of food in this sculpture.

Room S9 next door contains the most famous piece of **Srivijaya** art (seventh to thirteenth centuries), a bronze Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara found at Chaiya (according to Mahayana Buddhism, a *bodhisattva* is a saint who has postponed his passage into Nirvana to help ordinary believers gain enlightenment). With its pouting face and sinuous torso, this image has become the ubiquitous emblem of southern Thailand. The rough chronological order of the collection continues back downstairs with an exhibition of **Khmer** and **Lopburi** sculpture (seventh to fourteenth centuries), most notably some dynamic bronze statuettes and stone lintels. Look out for an elaborate lintel that depicts Vishnu reclining on a dragon in the sea of eternity, dreaming up a new universe after the old one has been annihilated in the Hindu cycle of creation and destruction. Out of his navel comes a lotus, and out of this emerges four-headed Brahma, who will put the dream into practice.

The main collection: northern building

The second half of the survey, in the northern building, begins upstairs with the **Sukhothai** collection (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries), which features some typically elegant and sinuous Buddha images, as well as chunky bronzes of Hindu gods and a wide range of ceramics. The **Lanna** rooms (roughly thirteenth to sixteenth centuries) include a miniature set of golden regalia, among them tiny umbrellas and a cute pair of filigree flip-flops, which would have been enshrined in a chedi. An ungainly but serene Buddha head, carved from grainy, pink sandstone, represents the **Ayutthaya** style of sculpture (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries): the faintest incision of a moustache above the lips betrays the Khmer influences that came to Ayutthaya after its conquest of Angkor. A sumptuous scripture cabinet, showing a cityscape of old Ayutthaya, is a more unusual piece, one of a surviving handful of such carved and painted items of furniture.

Downstairs in the section on **Bangkok** or **Ratanakosin** art (eighteenth century onwards), a stiffly realistic standing bronze brings you full circle. In his zeal for Western naturalism, Rama V had the statue made in the Gandhara style of the earliest Buddha image displayed in the first room of the museum.

The funeral chariots

To the east of the northern building, beyond the café on the left, stands a large garage where the fantastically elaborate **funeral chariots** of the royal family are stored. Pre-eminent among these is the Vejayant Rajarot, built by Rama I in 1785 for carrying the urn at his own funeral. The thirteen-metre-high structure symbolizes heaven on Mount Meru, while the dragons and divinities around the sides – piled in five golden tiers to suggest the flames of the cremation – represent the mythological inhabitants of the mountain's forests. Each weighing around forty tonnes and requiring the pulling power of three hundred men, the teak chariots last had an outing in 1996, for the funeral of the present king's much-revered mother.

Wang Na (Palace of the Second King)

The sprawling central building of the compound was originally part of the **Wang Na**, a huge palace stretching across Sanam Luang to Khlong Lod, which housed the "second king", appointed by the reigning monarch as his heir and deputy. When Rama V did away with the office in 1887, he turned the "Palace of the Second King" into a museum, which now contains a fascinating array of Thai *objets d'art*. As you enter (room 5), the display of sumptuous rare gold pieces behind heavy iron bars includes a well-preserved armlet taken from the ruined prang of fifteenth-century Wat Ratburana in Ayutthaya. In adjacent room 6, an intricately carved ivory seat turns out, with gruesome irony, to be a *howdah*, for use on an elephant's back. Among the masks worn by *khon* actors next door (room 7), look out especially for a fierce Hanuman, the white monkey-warrior in the *Ramayana* epic, gleaming with mother-of-pearl.

The huge and varied ceramic collection in room 8 includes some sophisticated pieces from Sukhothai, while the room behind (9) holds a riot of mother-of-pearl items, whose flaming rainbow of colours comes from the shell of the turbo snail from the Gulf of Thailand. It's also worth seeking out the display of richly decorated musical instruments in room 15.

The Buddhaisawan Chapel

The second holiest image in Thailand, after the Emerald Buddha, is housed in the **Buddhaisawan Chapel**, the vast hall in front of the eastern entrance to the Wang Na. Inside, the fine proportions of the hall, with its ornate coffered ceiling and lacquered window shutters, are enhanced by painted rows of divinities and converted demons, all turned to face the chubby, glowing **Phra Sihing Buddha**, which according to legend was magically created in Sri Lanka and sent to Sukhothai in the thirteenth century. Like the Emerald Buddha, the image was believed to bring good luck to its owner and was frequently snatched from one northern town to another, until Rama I brought it down from Chiang Mai in 1795 and installed it here in the second king's private chapel. Two other images (in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Chiang Mai) now claim to be the authentic Phra Sihing Buddha, but all three are in fact derived from a lost original – this one is in a fifteenth-century Sukhothai style. It's still much loved by ordinary people and at Thai New Year is carried out onto Sanam Luang, where worshippers sprinkle it with water as a merit-making gesture.

The careful detail and rich, soothing colours of the surrounding 200-year-old **murals** are surprisingly well preserved; the bottom row between the windows narrates the life of the Buddha, beginning in the far right-hand corner with his parents' wedding.

Tamnak Daeng

On the south side of the Buddhaisawan Chapel, the sumptuous **Tamnak Daeng** (Red House) stands out, a large, airy Ayutthaya-style house made of rare golden teak, surmounted by a multi-tiered roof decorated with carved foliage and swan's-tail finials. Originally part of the private quarters of Princess Sri Sudarak, elder sister of Rama I, it was moved from the Grand Palace to the old palace in Thonburi for Queen Sri Suriyen, wife of Rama II; when her son became second king to Rama IV, he dismantled the edifice again and shipped it here to the Wang Na compound. Inside, it's furnished in the style of the early Bangkok period, with some of the beautiful objects that once belonged to Sri Suriyen, a huge, ornately carved box bed, and the uncommon luxury of an indoor toilet and bathroom.

Banglamphu and the Democracy Monument area

Best known as the site of the travellers' mecca, Thanon Khao San (for more on which, see p.107), the **Banglamphu** district (see map on pp.108–09) also has a couple of noteworthy temples. But the most interesting sights in this part of the city are found to the south and east of Democracy Monument, within walking distance of Khao San guest houses and equally accessible from the Grand Palace. **Democracy Monument** (*Anu Sawari Pracha Tippatai)* itself was designed in 1939 as a testimony to the ideals that fuelled the 1932 revolution and the changeover to a constitutional monarchy, hence its symbolic positioning between the Grand Palace and the new royal district of Dusit. It has long been the rallying point for political demonstrations, including the fateful student-led protests of October 14, 1973, when several hundred people died at the hands of the police and the military, an event now commemorated by the nearby **October 14 Memorial**, a small granite amphitheatre encircling an elegant modern chedi.

The pleasantest way to walk between the Grand Palace and Banglamphu is via the **riverside walkway** that runs alongside the Chao Phraya from the Bangkok Information Centre at Phra Pinklao Bridge to the renovated Phra Sumen Fortress, located in Santichaiprakarn Park at the junction of Phra Athit and Phra Sumen roads. If coming from downtown Bangkok, the fastest way to get to this area is by longtail canal boat along Khlong Saen Saeb (see p.102): the Phan Fah terminus for this boat service is right next to the Golden Mount compound. For details on bus and express-boat services to Banglamphu, see p.111.

Wat Rajnadda, Loh Prasat and the amulet market

Five minutes' walk southeast of Democracy Monument, at the point where Rajdamnoen Klang meets Thanon Mahachai, stands the assortment of religious buildings known collectively as **Wat Rajnadda**. It's immediately recognizable by the multi-tiered, castle-like structure called **Loh Prasat**, or "Iron Monastery" – a

△ Democracy Monument

Amulets

To gain protection from malevolent spirits and physical misfortune, Thais wear or carry at least one **amulet** at all times. The most popular **images** are copies of sacred statues from famous wats, while others show revered holy men, kings (Rama V is a favourite), healers or a many-armed monk depicted closing his eyes, ears and mouth so as to concentrate better on reaching Nirvana. On the reverse side a *yantra* is often inscribed, a combination of letters and figures also designed to ward off evil, sometimes of a very specific nature: protecting your durian orchards from gales, for example, or your tuk-tuk from oncoming traffic. Monks are often involved in the making of the images and are always called upon to consecrate them – the more charismatic the monk, the more powerful the amulet. In return, the proceeds from the sale of amulets contribute to wat funds.

Not all amulets are Buddhist-related – there's a whole range of other enchanted objects to wear for protection, including tigers' teeth, rose quartz, tamarind seeds, coloured threads and miniature phalluses. Worn around the waist rather than the neck, the phallus amulets provide protection for the genitals as well as being associated with fertility, and are of Hindu origin.

For some people, amulets are not only a vital form of spiritual protection, but valuable **collectors' items** as well. Amulet-collecting mania is something akin to stamp collecting – there are at least half a dozen Thai magazines for collectors, which give histories of certain types, tips on distinguishing between genuine items and fakes, and personal accounts of particularly powerful amulet experiences. The most rewarding places to watch the collectors and browse the wares yourself are at Wat Rajnadda Buddha Center (see below); along "Amulet Alley" on Trok Mahathat, between Wat Mahathat (see p.133) and the river; and at Chatuchak Weekend Market (see p.159).

reference to its 37 forbiddingly dark metal spires, which represent the 37 virtues necessary for attaining enlightenment. The only structure of its kind in Bangkok, Loh Prasat is the dominant and most bizarre of Wat Rajnadda's components. Each tier is pierced by passageways running north–south and east–west (fifteen in each direction at ground level), with small meditation cells at each point of intersection. The Sri Lankan monastery on which it is modelled contained a thousand cells; this one probably has half that number.

In the southeast (Thanon Mahachai) corner of the temple compound, Bangkok's biggest amulet market, the **Wat Rajnadda Buddha Center**, comprises at least a hundred stalls selling tiny Buddha images of all designs, materials and prices. Alongside these miniature charms are statues of Hindu deities, dolls and carved wooden phalluses, also bought to placate or ward off disgruntled spirits, as well as love potions and tapes of sacred music. While the amulet market at Wat Rajnadda is probably the best in Bangkok, you'll find less pricey examples from the street-side vendors who congregate daily along the pavement in front of Wat Mahathat. Prices start as low as B20 and rise into the thousands.

The Golden Mount

Beautifully illuminated at night, when it seems to float unsupported above the neighbourhood, the gleaming gold chedi across the road from Wat Rajnadda is part of **Wat Saket** and sits atop a nineteenth-century structure known as the **Golden Mount**, which offers a good view of the Grand Palace and distant Wat Arun from its terrace. To reach the walkway up the mount, follow the renovated crenellations of the eighteenth-century Phra Mahakan Fortress, past the small bird and antiques market that operates from one of the recesses, before veering left when signposted.

Wat Saket hosts an enormous annual **temple fair** in the first week of November, when the mount is illuminated with coloured lanterns and the whole compound seethes with funfair rides, food-sellers and travelling performers.

Wat Suthat, Sao Ching Cha and Thanon Bamrung Muang

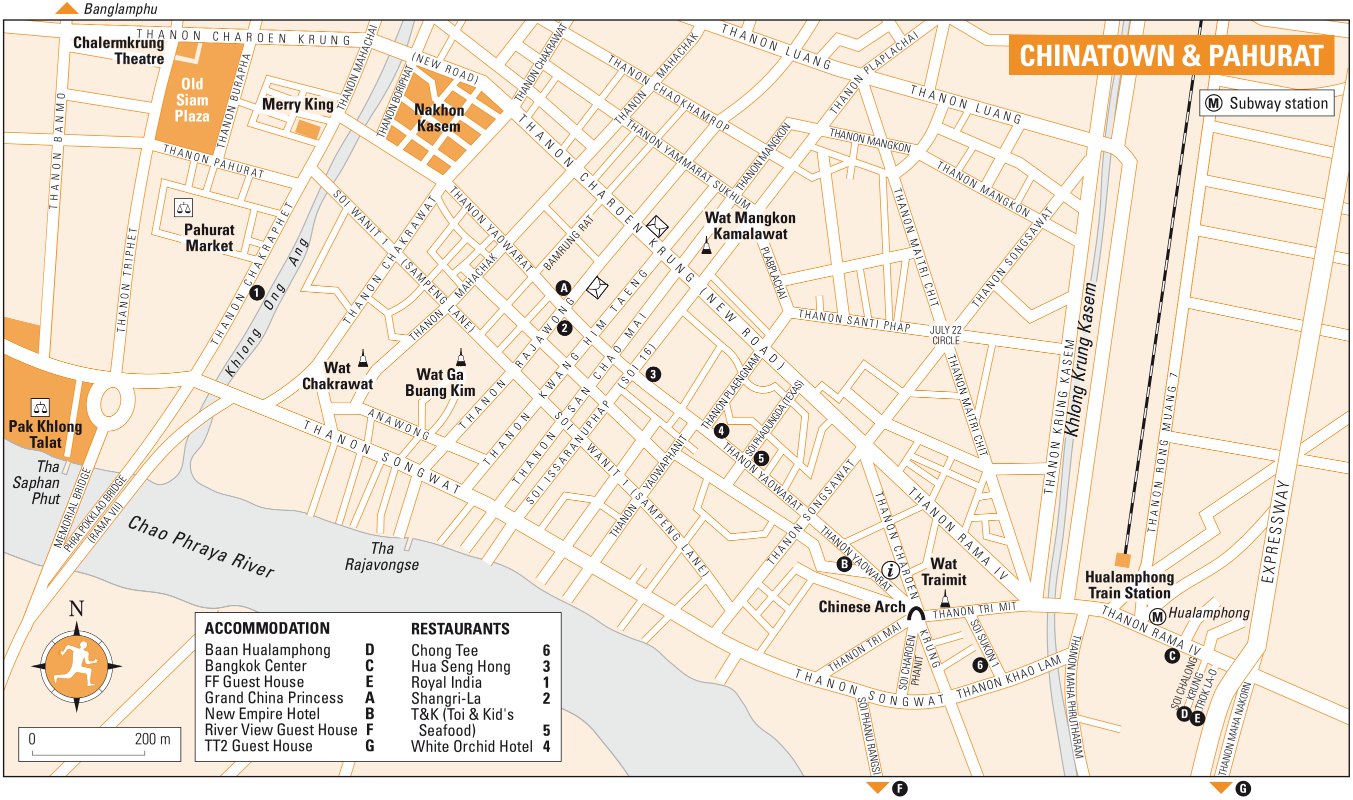
Located about 700m southwest of the Golden Mount, or a similar distance directly south of Democracy Monument along Thanon Dinso, **Wat Suthat** (daily 9am–9pm; B20) is one of Thailand's six most important temples and contains Bangkok's tallest viharn, built in the early nineteenth century to house the eight-metre-high meditating figure of Phra Sri Sakyamuni Buddha. The galleries that encircle the viharn contain 156 serenely posed Buddha images, making a nice contrast to the **Chinese statues** dotted around the viharn's courtyard and that of the bot in the adjacent compound, most of which were brought over from China during Rama I's reign, as ballast in rice boats: check out the depictions of gormless Western sailors and the pompous Chinese scholars.

The area just in front of Wat Suthat is dominated by the towering, red-painted teak posts of **Sao Ching Cha**, otherwise known as the **Giant Swing**, once the focal point of a Brahmin ceremony to honour Shiva's annual visit to earth. Teams of two or four young men would stand on the outsized seat (now missing) and swing up to a height of 25m, to grab between their teeth a bag of gold suspended on the end of a bamboo pole. The act of swinging probably symbolized the rising and setting of the sun, though legend also has it that Shiva and his consort Uma were banned from swinging in their heavenly abode because doing so caused cataclysmic floods on earth – prompting Shiva to demand that the practice be continued on earth as a rite to ensure moderate rains and bountiful harvests. Accidents were so common with the terrestrial version that it was outlawed in the 1930s.

The streets leading up to Wat Suthat and Sao Ching Cha are renowned as the best place in the city to buy **religious paraphernalia**, and are well worth a browse even for tourists. **Thanon Bamrung Muang** in particular is lined with shops selling everything a good Buddhist could need, from household offertory tables to temple umbrellas and two-metre Buddha images. They also sell special alms packs for devotees to donate to monks; a typical pack is contained within a (holy saffron-coloured) plastic bucket (which can be used by the monk for washing his robes, or himself), and comprises such daily necessities as soap, toothpaste, soap powder, toilet roll, candles and incense.

Chinatown and Pahurat

When the newly crowned Rama I decided to move his capital across to the east bank of the river in 1782, the Chinese community living on the proposed site of his palace was given no choice but to relocate downriver, to the **Sampeng** area. Two hundred years on, **Chinatown** has grown into the country's largest Chinese district, a sprawl of narrow alleyways, temples and shophouses packed between Charoen Krung (New Road) and the river, separated from Ratanakosin by the Indian area of **Pahurat** – famous for its cloth and curry houses – and bordered to the east by Hualamphong train station. Real estate in this part of the city is said to be amongst the most valuable in the country, and there are over a hundred gold and jewellery shops along Thanon Yaowarat alone. For the tourist, Chinatown is chiefly interesting for its markets, shophouses, open-fronted warehouses and remnants of colonial-style architecture, though it also harbours a few noteworthy



CHINATOWN & PAHURAT

Ⓜ Subway station

ACCOMMODATION	
Baan Hualamphong	D
Bangkok Center	C
FF Guest House	E
Grand China Princess	A
New Empire Hotel	B
River View Guest House	F
TT2 Guest House	G

RESTAURANTS	
Chong Tee	6
Hua Seng Hong	3
Royal India	1
Shangri-La	2
T&K (Toi & Kid's Seafood)	5
White Orchid Hotel	4

Banglamphu
Thanon Charoen Krung
Chalermkrung Theatre
Old Siam Plaza
Thanon Burapha
Merry King
Thanon Mahachai
(New Road)
Thanon Boriphat
Nakhon Kasem
Thanon Chakrawat
Thanon Mahachak
Thanon Chaokhamrop
Thanon Luang
Thanon Plaplachai
Thanon Mangkon
Thanon Yammarat Sukhum
Thanon Banmo
Thanon Pahurat
Thanon Triphet
Pahurat Market
Thanon Chakraphet
Khlong Ong Ang
Soi Wanit 1
Thanon Chakrawat
(Sampeng Lane)
Thanon Yaowarat
Bamrung Rat
Thanon Charoen Krung
Wat Mangkon Kamalawat
Plabplachai
Thanon Maitri Chit
Thanon Songsawat
Thanon Santi Phap
July 22 Circle
Rajawong
Thanon Mahachak
Him Taeng
Chao Mai
(Soi 16)
Kwang
Soi Sanuphap
Soi Issaranuphap
(New Road)
Thanon Plaengnam
Soi Phadungdao (Texas)
Thanon Yaowarat
Wat Chakrawat
Wat Ga Buang Kim
Anawong
Thanon Songwat
Thanon Yaowaphanit
Wanit 1 (Sampeng Lane)
Thanon Songsawat
Thanon Charoen
Thanon Rama IV
Wat Traimit
Chinese Arch
Thanon Tri Mit
Thanon Tri Mai
Soi Charoen Phanit
Krung
Soi Sukon 1
Thanon Khao Lam
Thanon Songwat
Soi Phanu Rangsi
Thanon Krung Kasem
Khlong Krung Kasem
Thanon Maha Phrutharam
Thanon Rong Muang 7
Hualamphong Train Station
Ⓜ Hualamphong
Thanon Rama IV
Soi Chalong Krung
Trok La-O
Thanon Maha Nakorn
Expressway
Pak Khlong Talat
Tha Saphan Phut
Memorial Bridge
Phra Pokklao Bridge (Rama VII)
Chao Phraya River
Tha Rajavongse
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temples. The following account covers Chinatown's main attractions and most interesting neighbourhoods, sketching a meandering and quite lengthy route which could easily take a whole day to complete on foot. For the most authentic Chinatown experience it's best to come during the week, as some shops and stalls shut at weekends; on weekdays they begin closing around 5pm.

Easiest access is either by **subway** to Hualamphong Station, or by Chao Phraya **express boat** to Tha Rachawongse (Rajawong; N5) at the southern end of Thanon Rajawong, which runs through the centre of Chinatown. This part of the city is also well served by **buses** from downtown Bangkok, as well as from Banglamphu and Ratanakosin (see box on pp.100–01); from Banglamphu either take any Hualamphong-bound bus and then walk from the train station, or catch the non-air-conditioned bus #56, which runs along Thanon Tanao at the end of Thanon Khao San and then goes all the way down Mahachai and Chakraphet roads in Chinatown – get off just after the Merry King department store for Sampeng Lane. Coming from downtown Bangkok and/or the Skytrain network, either switch to the subway, or jump on a non-air-conditioned bus #25 or #40, both of which run from Thanon Sukhumvit, via Siam Square to Hualamphong, then Thanon Yaowarat and on to Pahurat.

Orientation in Chinatown can be quite tricky: the alleys (known as trok rather than the more usual soi) are extremely narrow, their turn-offs and other road signs often obscured by the mounds of merchandise that clutter the sidewalks and the surrounding hordes of buyers and sellers. For a detailed tour of the alleys and markets, use *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok*; alternatively, ask for help at the BTB **tourist information** booth (Mon–Sat 9am–5pm) just northwest of the Chinese Arch on Thanon Yaowarat.

Wat Traimit and the Golden Buddha

Given the confusing layout of the district, it's worth starting your explorations at the eastern edge of Chinatown, just west of Hualamphong train and subway stations, with the triangle of land occupied by **Wat Traimit** (daily 9am–5pm; B20). Cross the khlong beside the station and walk 200m down (signed) Thanon Tri Mit to enter the temple compound. Outwardly unprepossessing, the temple boasts a quite stunning interior feature: the world's largest solid-gold Buddha is housed here, fitting for a community so closely linked with the gold trade, even if the image has nothing to do with China's spiritual heritage. Over 3m tall and weighing five and a half tons, the **Golden Buddha** gleams as if coated in liquid metal, seated amidst candles and surrounded with offerings of lotus buds and incense. A fine example of the curvaceous grace of Sukhothai art, the beautifully proportioned figure is best appreciated by comparing it with the cruder Sukhothai Buddha in the next-door bot, to the east.

Cast in the thirteenth century, the image was brought to Bangkok by Rama III, completely encased in stucco – a common ruse to conceal valuable statues from would-be thieves. The disguise was so good that no one guessed what was underneath until 1955, when the image was accidentally knocked in the process of being moved to Wat Traimit, and the stucco cracked to reveal a patch of gold. The discovery launched a country-wide craze for tapping away at plaster Buddhas in search of hidden precious metals, but Wat Traimit's is still the most valuable – it's valued, by weight alone, at over US$10 million. Sections of the stucco casing are now on display alongside the Golden Buddha.

Sampeng Lane, Soi Issaranuphap and Wat Mangkon Kamalawat

Leaving Wat Traimit by the Charoen Krung/Yaowarat exit (at the back of the temple compound), walk northwest along Thanon Yaowarat, and make a left turn onto Thanon Songsawat, to reach **Sampeng Lane** (also signposted as Soi Wanit 1), an area that used to thrive on opium dens, gambling houses and brothels, but now sticks to a more reputable (if tacky) commercial trade. Stretching south-east–northwest for about 1km, Sampeng Lane is a fun place to browse and shop, unfurling itself like a ramshackle department store selling everything from Chinese silk pyjama pants to computer games at bargain-basement rates. Like goods are more or less gathered in sections, so at the eastern end you'll find mostly cheap jewellery and hair accessories, for example, before passing through stalls specializing in ceramics, Chinese lanterns and shoes, followed by clothes (west of Thanon Rajawong), sarongs and haberdashery.

For a rather more sensual experience, take a right about halfway down Sampeng Lane, into **Soi Issaranuphap** (also signed in places as Soi 16). Packed with people from dawn till dusk, this long, dark alleyway, which also traverses Charoen Krung (New Road), is where you come in search of ginseng roots (essential for good health), quivering fish heads, cubes of cockroach-killer chalk and pungent piles of cinnamon sticks. You'll see Chinese grandfathers discussing business in darkened shops, ancient pharmacists concocting bizarre potions to order, alleys branching off in all directions to gaudy Chinese temples and market squares. Soi Issaranuphap finally ends at the Thanon Plaplachai intersection amid a flurry of shops specializing in paper **funeral art**. Believing that the deceased should be well provided for in their afterlife, Chinese people buy miniature paper replicas of necessities to be burned with the body: especially popular are houses, cars, suits of clothing and, of course, money.

If Soi Issaranuphap epitomizes traditional Chinatown commerce, then **Wat Mangkon Kamalawat** (also known as **Wat Leng Nee Yee** or, in English, "Dragon Flower Temple") stands as a superb example of the community's spiritual practices. Best approached via its dramatic multi-tiered gateway 10m up Thanon Charoen Krung (New Road) from the Soi Issaranuphap junction, Wat Mangkon receives a constant stream of devotees, who come to leave offerings at one or more of the small altars inside this important Mahayana Buddhist temple. As with the Theravada Buddhism espoused by the Thais, Mahayana Buddhism (see "Religion: Thai Buddhism" in Contexts) fuses with other ancient religious beliefs, notably Confucianism and Taoism, and the statues and shrines within Wat Mangkon cover the whole spectrum. Passing through the secondary gateway, under the glazed ceramic gables topped with undulating Chinese dragons, you're greeted by a set of four outsize statues of bearded and rather forbidding sages, each clasping a symbolic object: a parasol, a pagoda, a snake's head and a mandolin. Beyond them, a series of Buddha images swathed in saffron netting occupies the next chamber, a lovely open-sided room of gold paintwork, red-lacquered wood, lattice lanterns and pictorial wall panels inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Elsewhere in the compound are little booths selling devotional paraphernalia, a Chinese medicine stall and a fortune-teller.

Wat Ga Buang Kim

Less than 100m up Thanon Charoen Krung (New Road) from Wat Mangkon, a left turn into Thanon Rajawong, followed by a right turn into Thanon Anawong and a further right turn into the narrow, two-pronged Soi Krai brings you to the typical neighbourhood temple of **Wat Ga Buang Kim**. Here, as at Thai temples upcountry, local residents socialize in the shade of the tiny, enclosed courtyard and the occasional worshipper drops by to pay homage at the altar. This particular wat is remarkable for its exquisitely ornamented "vegetarian hall", a one-room shrine with altar centrepiece framed by intricately carved wooden tableaux – gold-painted miniatures arranged as if in sequence, with recognizable characters reappearing in new positions and in different moods. The hall's outer wall is adorned with small tableaux, too, the area around the doorway at the top of the stairs peopled with finely crafted ceramic figurines drawn from Chinese opera stories. The other building in the wat compound is a stage used for Chinese opera performances.

△ Pak Khlong Talat flower market

Pak Khlong Talat

A browse through the 24-hour flower and vegetable market, **Pak Khlong Talat**, is a fine and fitting way to round off a day in Chinatown, though if you're an early riser it's also a great place to come before dawn, when market gardeners from Thonburi boat and truck their freshly picked produce across the Chao Phraya ready for sale to the shopkeepers, restaurateurs and hoteliers. Occupying an ideal position close to the river, the market has been operating from covered halls between the southern ends of Khlong Lod, Thanon Banmo, Thanon Chakraphet and the river bank since the nineteenth century and is the biggest wholesale market in the capital. The flower stalls, selling twenty different varieties of cut orchids and myriad other tropical blooms, spill onto the streets along the riverfront as well and, though prices are lowest in the early morning, you can still get some good bargains here in the afternoon. The riverside end of nearby Thanon Triphet and the area around the base of **Memorial Bridge (Saphan Phut)** hosts a huge **night bazaar** (nightly 8pm–midnight) that's dominated by cheap and idiosyncratic fashions – and by throngs of teenage fashion victims.

The Chao Phraya **express boat** service stops just a few metres from the market at Tha Saphan Phut (N6). Numerous city **buses** stop in front of the market and pier, including the northbound non-air-conditioned #3 and air-conditioned #512, which both run to Banglamphu (see box on pp.100–01).

Thonburi

Bangkok really began across the river from Ratanakosin in the town of **Thonburi**. Devoid of grand ruins and isolated from central Bangkok, it's hard to imagine Thonburi as a former capital of Thailand, but so it was for fifteen years, between the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 and the establishment of Bangkok in 1782. General Phraya Taksin chose to set up his capital here, strategically near the sea and far from the marauding Burmese, but the story of his brief reign is a chronicle of battles that left little time and few resources to devote to the building of a city worthy of its predecessor. When General Chao Phraya displaced the by now demented Taksin to become Rama I, his first decision as founder of the Chakri dynasty was to move the capital to the more defensible site across the river. It wasn't until 1932 that Thonburi was linked to its replacement by the **Memorial Bridge**, or **Saphan Phut**, built to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Chakri dynasty and of Bangkok, and dedicated to Rama I (or Phra Buddha Yodfa, to give him his official title), whose bronze statue sits at the Bangkok approach. It proved to be such a crucial river-crossing that the bridge has since been supplemented by the adjacent twin-track Saphan Phra Pokklao. Thonburi retained its separate identity for another forty years until, in 1971, it officially became part of Bangkok.

As well as the imposing riverside structure of **Wat Arun**, Thonburi is home to the **Royal Barge Museum**, and there's additional appeal in the traditional canalside neighbourhoods that dominate the old quarters. Life on this side of the river still revolves around the khlongs: vendors of food and household goods paddle their boats along the canals that crisscross the residential areas, and canalside factories use them to transport their wares to the Chao Phraya River artery.

Getting to Thonburi is simply a matter of crossing the river – use one of the numerous bridges (Memorial/Phra Pokklao and Phra Pinklao are the most central), take a cross-river ferry, or hop on the express ferry, which makes several stops on the Thonburi bank. The Southern Bus Terminal is in Thonburi, at the junction of

Thanon Borom Ratchonni and the Nakhon Chaisri Highway, and all public and air-conditioned buses to southern destinations leave from here (see p.186).

Royal Barge Museum

Since the Ayutthaya era, kings of Thailand have been conveyed along their country's waterways in royal barges. For centuries these slender, exquisitely elegant, black-and-gold wooden vessels were used on all important royal outings, and even up until 1967 the current king used to process down the Chao Phraya River

Exploring Thonburi by boat

The most popular way to explore the sights of Thonburi is by **boat**, taking in Wat Arun and the Royal Barge Museum, then continuing along Thonburi's network of small canals. The easiest option is to take a fixed-price trip from one of the piers on the Bangkok side of the Chao Phraya, and most of these companies also feature visits to Thonburi's two main **floating markets**, both of which are heavily touristed and rather contrived. **Wat Sai** floating market happens daily from Monday to Friday but is very commercialized, and half of it is land-based anyway, while **Taling Chan** floating market is also fairly manufactured but more fun, though it only operates on Saturdays and Sundays. Taling Chan market is held on Khlong Chak Phra and is easily woven in to a private boat tour as described below; it's held in front of Taling Chan District Office, a couple of kilometres west of Thonburi train station, and can also be reached by taking bus #79 from Democracy Monument/Ratchadamnoen Klang to Khet Taling Chan.

Arguably more photogenic, and certainly a lot more genuine, are the individual **floating vendors** who continue to paddle from house to house touting anything from hot food to plastic buckets: you've a good chance of seeing some of them in action on almost any private boat tour on any day of the week, particularly in the morning.

Fixed-priced trips with The Boat Tour Centre (ⓣ02 235 3108) at Tha Si Phraya cost B800 per boat for one whistle-stop hour, B1500 for two hours and go either to Wat Sai (for which you need to be at the pier by about 8am; Mon–Fri only), or around the Thonburi canals, taking in Wat Arun and the Royal Barge Museum (can depart any time). The Mitchaopaya Travel Service (ⓣ02 623 6169), operating out of Tha Chang, offers trips of varying durations that all take in the Royal Barge Museum and Wat Arun: in one hour (B800), you'll go out along Khlong Bangkok Noi and back via Khlong Mon, in ninety minutes (B1000) you'll come back along Khlong Bangkok Yai, while in two hours (B1200) you'll have time to go right down the back canals on the Thonburi side and visit an orchid farm. From Monday to Friday, all of these Mitchaopaya trips stop off at the tiny so-called "Thonburi Floating Market", which even their own staff can't recommend, but on Saturdays and Sundays they take in the much livelier Taling Chan floating market. Real Asia (ⓣ02 665 6364, ⓦwww.realasia.net) runs guided full-day walking and boat tours of the Thonburi canals for B1800 per person.

It's also possible to **organize your own longtail boat trip** around Thonburi from other piers, including Tha Oriental (at the Oriental Hotel), the pier at the River City Shopping Centre, Tha Wang Nah, next to the Bangkok Information Centre on Thanon Phra Athit in Banglamphu, and the Tha Phra Athit pier that's across from Ricky's Coffee Shop on Thanon Phra Athit (200m south of the N13 Tha Phra Athit express boat pier), but bear the above prices in mind and be prepared for some heavy bargaining. An enjoyable 90-minute loop from Tha Phra Athit, via Khlong Bangkok Noi, Khlong Chak Phra and Khlong Bangkok Yai, should cost B700 for a private two-person trip and will take in a variety of different khlongside residences, temples and itinerant floating vendors, but won't include any stops.

to Wat Arun in a flotilla of royal barges at least once a year, on the occasion of Kathin, the annual donation of robes by the laity to the temple at the end of the rainy season. But the 100-year-old boats are becoming quite frail, so such an event is now rare: the last full-scale royal processions were floated in 1999, to mark the king's 72nd birthday, and in 2006 to celebrate his sixtieth year on the throne. A **royal barge procession** along the Chao Phraya is a magnificent event, all the more spectacular because it happens so infrequently. Fifty or more barges fill the width of the river and stretch for almost 1km, drifting slowly to the measured beat of a drum and the hypnotic strains of ancient boating hymns, chanted by over two thousand oarsmen dressed in luscious brocades.

The eight beautifully crafted vessels at the heart of the ceremony are housed in the **Royal Barge Museum** on the north bank of Khlong Bangkok Noi (daily 9am–5pm; B30; Ⓦwww.thailandmuseum.com). Up to 50m long and intricately lacquered and gilded all over, they taper at the prow into imposing mythical figures after a design first used by the kings of Ayutthaya. Rama I had the boats copied and, when those fell into disrepair, Rama VI commissioned the exact reconstructions still in use today. The most important is *Sri Suphanahongse*, which bears the king and queen and is graced by a glittering five-metre-high prow representing the golden swan Hamsa, mount of the Hindu god Brahma. A display of miniaturized royal barges at the back of the museum re-creates the exact formation of a traditional procession.

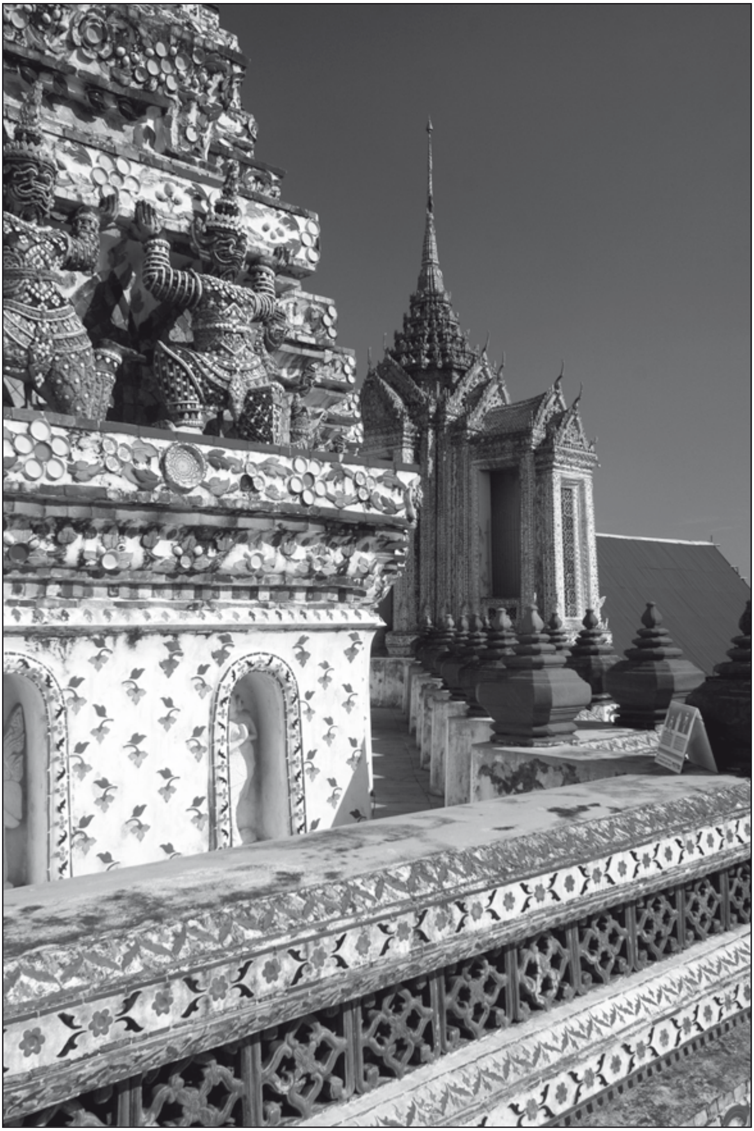
The museum is a feature of most canal tours but is easily visited on your own. Just take the Chao Phraya **express boat** to Tha Phra Pinklao (N12) or, if coming from Banglamphu, take the cheaper, more frequent cross-river ferry (B3) from under Pinklao bridge, beside the Bangkok Information Centre, to Tha Phra Pinklao across the river, then walk up the road a hundred metres and take the first left down Soi Wat Dusitaram. If coming by **bus** from the Bangkok side (air-con buses #503, #507, #509, #511 and #32 all cross the river here), get off at the first stop on the Thonburi side, which is right beside the mouth of Soi Wat Dusitaram. Signs from Soi Wat Dusitaram lead you through a jumble of walkways and stilt-houses to the museum, about ten minutes' walk away.

Wat Arun

Almost directly across the river from Wat Pho rises the enormous, five-spired prang of **Wat Arun** (daily 7am–5pm; B20; Ⓦwww.watarun.org), the Temple of Dawn, probably Bangkok's most memorable landmark and familiar as the silhouette used in the TAT logo. It looks particularly impressive from the river as you head downstream from the Grand Palace towards the *Oriental Hotel*, but is ornate enough to be well worth stopping off at for a closer look. All boat tours include half an hour here, but Wat Arun is also easily visited by yourself, although tour operators will try to persuade you otherwise: just take a B3 cross-river ferry from the pier adjacent to the Chao Phraya express-boat pier at Tha Thien.

A wat has occupied this site since the Ayutthaya period, but only in 1768 did it become known as the Temple of Dawn – when General Phraya Taksin reputedly reached his new capital at the break of day. The temple served as his royal chapel and housed the recaptured Emerald Buddha for several years until the image was moved to Wat Phra Kaeo in 1785. Despite losing its special status after the relocation, Wat Arun continued to be revered and its corncob prang was reconstructed and enlarged to its present height of 81m by Rama II and Rama III.

The prang that you see today is classic Ayutthayan style, built as a representation of Mount Meru, the home of the gods in Khmer cosmology. Climbing the two tiers of the square base that supports the **central prang**, you not only enjoy a good view of the river and beyond, but also get a chance to examine the tower's



△ Wat Arun

distinctive decorations. Both this main prang and the four minor ones that encircle it are studded all over with bits of broken porcelain, ceramic shards and tiny bowls that have been fashioned into an amazing array of polychromatic flowers. The statues of mythical *yaksha* demons and half-bird, half-human *kinnari* that support the different levels are similarly decorated. The crockery probably came from China, possibly from commercial shipments that were damaged at sea, but whatever its provenance, the overall effect is highly decorative and far more subtle than the dazzling glass mosaics that clad most wat buildings. On the first terrace, the mondops at each cardinal point contain statues of the Buddha at the most important stages of his life: at birth (north), in meditation (east), preaching his first sermon (south) and entering Nirvana (west). The second platform surrounds the base of the prang proper, whose closed entranceways are guarded by four statues of the Hindu god Indra on his three-headed elephant Erawan. In the niches of the smaller prangs stand statues of Phra Pai, the god of the wind, on horseback.

Dusit

Connected to Ratanakosin via the boulevards of Rajdamnoen Klang and Rajdamnoen Nok, the spacious, leafy area known as **Dusit** has been a royal district since the reign of Rama V, King Chulalongkorn (1860–1910). The first Thai monarch to visit Europe, Rama V returned with radical plans for the modernization of his capital, the fruits of which are most visible in Dusit: notably at **Vimanmek Palace** and **Wat Benjamabophit**, the so-called "Marble Temple". Even now, Rama V still commands a loyal following and his statue, which stands at the Thanon U-Thong-Thanon Sri Ayutthaya crossroads, is presented with offerings every week and is also the focus of celebrations on Chulalongkorn Day (Oct 23). Today, the peaceful Dusit area retains its European feel, and much of the country's decision-making goes on behind the high fences and impressive facades along its tree-lined avenues: the building that houses the National Parliament is here, as is Government House (used mainly for official functions), and the king's official residence, Chitrlada Palace, occupies the eastern edge of the area. On December 2 Dusit is also the venue for the spectacular annual **Trooping the Colour**, when hundreds of magnificently uniformed Royal Guards demonstrate their allegiance to the king by parading around Suan Amporn, across the road from the Rama V statue. Across from Chitrlada Palace, **Dusit Zoo** makes a pleasant enough place to take the kids.

From Banglamphu, you can get to Dusit by taking the #70 **bus** from Rajdamnoen Klang and getting off outside the zoo and Elephant Museum on Thanon U-Thong, or the #56 from Thanon Phra Athit or Thanon Phra Sumen and alighting at the Thanon Ratchasima entrance to Vimanmek Palace (see box on p.110); alternatively, take the **express boat** to Tha Thewes and then walk. From downtown Bangkok, easiest access is by bus from the Skytrain and subway stops at Victory Monument; there are many services from here, including air-con #510 and #16, both of which run all the way along Thanon Rajwithi.

Vimanmek Palace and the Royal Elephant National Museum

Breezy, elegant **Vimanmek Palace** (daily 9.30am–4pm; compulsory free guided tours every 30min, last tour 3.15pm; B100, or free with a Grand Palace ticket, which remains valid for one week; Ⓦwww.palaces.thai.net) was built by Rama V as a summer retreat on Ko Si Chang (see p.200), from where it was transported bit by bit in 1901. The ticket price also covers entry to a dozen other specialist collections in the palace grounds, including the Support Museum and Elephant Museum described opposite. All visitors are treated to free performances of traditional Thai dance daily at 10.30am and 2pm. Note that the same **dress rules** apply here as to the Grand Palace (see p.125). The main **entrance** to the extensive Vimanmek Palace compound is on Thanon Rajwithi, but there are also ticket gates on Thanon Ratchasima, and opposite Dusit Zoo on Thanon U-Thong.

Vimanmek Palace

Built almost entirely of golden teak without a single nail, the coffee-coloured, L-shaped Vimanmek Palace is encircled by delicate latticework verandas that look out onto well-kept lawns, flower gardens and lotus ponds. Not surprisingly, this "Celestial Residence" soon became Rama V's favourite palace, and he and his enormous retinue of officials, concubines and children stayed here for lengthy periods between 1902 and 1906. All of Vimanmek's 81 rooms were out of bounds to male visitors, except for the king's own apartments in the octagonal tower, which were entered by a separate staircase.

On display inside is Rama V's collection of artefacts from all over the world, including *bencharong* ceramics, European furniture and bejewelled Thai betel-nut sets. Considered progressive in his day, Rama V introduced many new-fangled ideas to Thailand: the country's first indoor bathroom is here, as is the earliest typewriter with Thai characters, and some of the first portrait paintings – portraiture had until then been seen as a way of stealing part of the sitter's soul.

The Support Museum

Elsewhere in the Vimanmek grounds a dozen handsome, pastel-painted royal residences have been converted into tiny, specialist interest museums, including collections of antique textiles, photographs taken by the king, royal ceremonial paraphernalia and antique clocks. The most interesting of these is the **Support Museum Abhisek Dusit Throne Hall**, which is housed in another very pretty building, formerly used for meetings and banquets, immediately behind (to the east of) Vimanmek. The Support Museum showcases the exquisite handicrafts produced under Queen Sirikit's charity project, Support, which works to revitalize traditional Thai arts and crafts. Outstanding exhibits include a collection of handbags, baskets and pots woven from the *lipao* fern that grows wild in southern Thailand; jewellery and figurines inlaid with the iridescent wings of beetles; gold and silver nielloware; and lengths of intricately woven silk from the northeast.

Chang Ton Royal Elephant National Museum

Just behind (to the east of) the Support Museum, inside the Thanon U-Thong entrance to the Vimanmek compound, stand two whitewashed buildings that once served as the stables for the king's white elephants. Now that the sacred pachyderms have been relocated, the stables have been turned into the **Royal Elephant National Museum** (Ⓦ www.thailandmuseum.com). Inside you'll find some interesting pieces of elephant paraphernalia, including sacred ropes, mahouts' amulets and magic formulae, as well as photos of the all-important ceremony in which a white elephant is granted royal status.

In Thailand the most revered of all elephants are the so-called **white elephants** – actually tawny brown albinos – which are considered so sacred that they all, whether wild or captive, belong to the king by law. The present king, Rama IX, has twelve, the largest royal collection to date. Before an elephant can be granted official "white elephant" status, it has to pass a stringent assessment of its physical and behavioural **characteristics**. Key qualities include a paleness of seven crucial areas – eyes, nails, palate, hair, outer edges of the ears, tail and testicles – and an all-round genteel demeanour, manifested, for instance, in the way in which it cleans its food before eating, or in a tendency to sleep in a kneeling position. The expression "white elephant" probably derives from the legend that the kings used to present certain enemies with one of these exotic creatures. The animal required expensive attention but, being royal, could not be put to work in order to pay for its upkeep. The recipient thus went bust trying to keep it.

Dusit Zoo (Khao Din)

Across Thanon U-Thong from the Elephant Museum is the side entrance into **Dusit Zoo**, also known as **Khao Din** (daily 8am–6pm; B30, children B5), which was once part of the Chitrlada Palace gardens, but is now a public park; the main entrance is on Thanon Rajwithi, and there's a third gate on Thanon Rama V, within walking distance of Wat Benjamabophit. All the usual suspects are here in the zoo, including big cats, elephants, orang-utans, chimpanzees and a reptile house, but the enclosures are pretty basic. However, it's a reasonable place for kids to let off steam, with plenty of shade, a full complement of English-language signs, a lake with pedalos and lots of foodstalls.

Wat Benjamabophit

Wat Benjamabophit (aka Wat Bencha; daily 7am–5pm; B20) is the last major temple to have been built in Bangkok. It's an interesting fusion of classical Thai and nineteenth-century European design, with its Carrara marble walls – hence the touristic tag "The Marble Temple" – complemented by the bot's unusual stained-glass windows, Victorian in style but depicting figures from Thai mythology. Inside, a fine replica of the highly revered Phra Buddha Chinnarat image of Phitsanulok presides over the small room containing Rama V's ashes. The courtyard behind the bot houses a gallery of Buddha images from all over Asia, set up by Rama V as an overview of different representations of the Buddha.

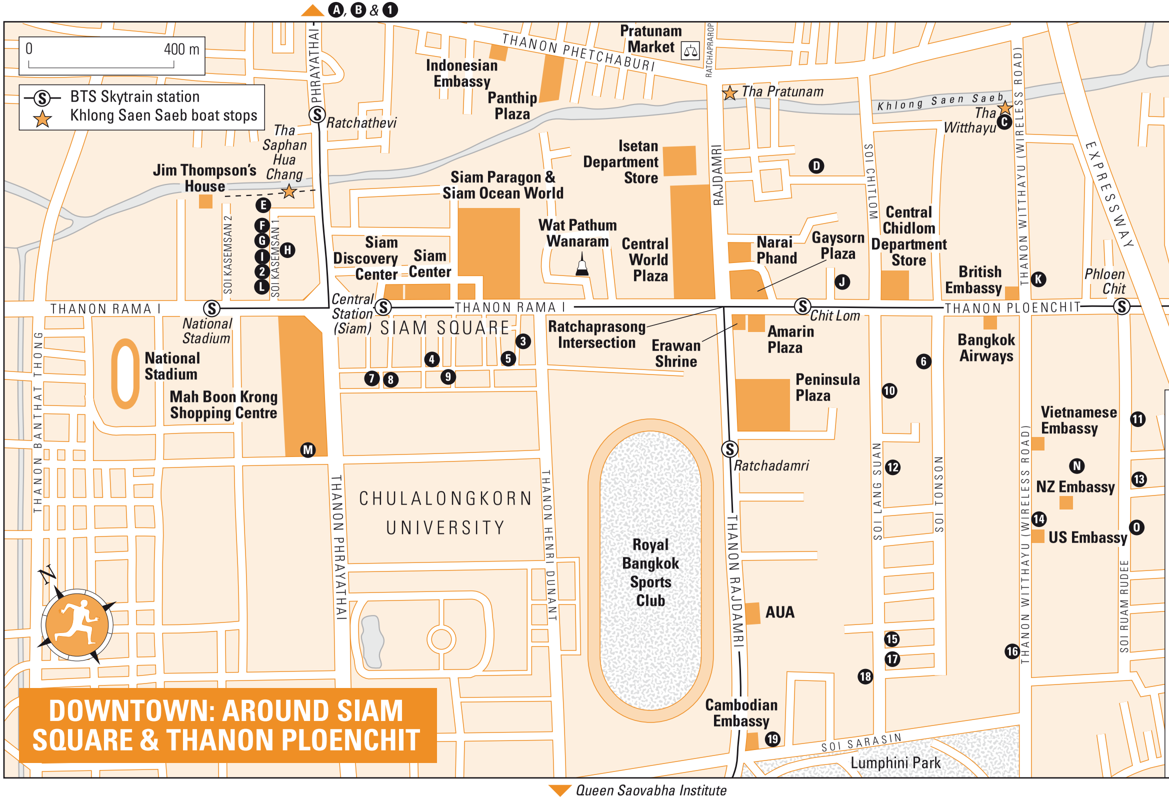
Wat Benjamabophit is one of the best temples in Bangkok to see religious **festivals** and rituals. Whereas monks elsewhere tend to go out on the streets every morning in search of alms, at the Marble Temple the ritual is reversed, and merit-makers come to them. Between about 6 and 7.30am, the monks line up on Thanon Nakhon Pathom, their bowls ready to receive donations of curry and rice, lotus buds, incense, even toilet paper and Coca-Cola; the demure row of saffron-robed monks is a sight that's well worth getting up early for. The evening candlelight processions around the bot during the Buddhist festivals of Maha Puja (in Feb) and Visakha Puja (in May) are among the most entrancing in the country.

Wat Benjamabophit is just a two-hundred-metre walk south of the zoo's Thanon Rama V entrance, or about 600m from Vimanmek's U-Thong gate. Coming by bus #70 from Banglamphu, get off at the crossroads in front of the Rama V statue and walk east along Thanon Sri Ayutthaya.

Downtown Bangkok

Extending east from the rail line and south to Thanon Sathorn, **downtown Bangkok** is central to the colossal expanse of Bangkok as a whole, but rather peripheral in a sightseer's perception of the city. This is where you'll find the main financial district, around Thanon Silom, and the chief shopping centres, around Siam Square and Thanon Ploenchit, in addition to the smart hotels and restaurants, the embassies and airline offices. Scattered widely across the downtown area are four attractive museums housed in traditional teak buildings: **Jim Thompson's House**, **Ban Kamthieng**, the **Suan Pakkad Palace Museum** and **M.R. Kukrit's Heritage Home**. Downtown's other tourist attractions are more diverse, including **Siam Ocean World**, a hi-tech aquarium that both kids and adults can enjoy, and the noisy and glittering **Erawan Shrine**. The infamous **Patpong** district hardly shines as a tourist sight, yet, lamentably, its sex bars still provide a huge draw for foreign men.

DOWNTOWN: AROUND SIAM SQUARE & THANON PLOENCHIT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Khlong Saen Saeb boat stops
THANON PHETCHABURI
Pratunam Market
RATCHAPRAROP
Tha Pratunam
Khlong Saen Saeb
Tha Witthayu
C
THANON WITTHAYU (WIRELESS ROAD)
EXPRESSWAY
SUKHUMVIT
Indonesian Embassy
Panthip Plaza
PHRAYATHAI
Ratchathevi
Tha Saphan Hua Chang
Jim Thompson's House
Isetan Department Store
Siam Paragon & Siam Ocean World
RAJDAMRI
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SOI CHITLOM
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Siam Center
THANON RAMA I
National Stadium
Central Station (Siam)
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THANON RAMA I
Chit Lom
THANON PLOENCHIT
Ratchaprasong Intersection
Erawan Shrine
Amarin Plaza
Bangkok Airways
6
10
Peninsula Plaza
National Stadium
Mah Boon Krong Shopping Centre
M
THANON BANTHAT THONG
CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY
THANON PHRAYATHAI
THANON HENRI DUNANT
Royal Bangkok Sports Club
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US Embassy
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N
Queen Saovabha Institute

ACCOMMODATION

A-One Inn	H
The Bed & Breakfast	F
Conrad	N
Far East Inn	D
Holiday Mansion Hotel	K
Jim's Lodge	O
Pathumwan Princess Hotel	M
Patumwan House	E
Reflections	B
Reno Hotel	L
Siam City Hotel	A
Swissôtel Nai Lert Park	C
VIP Guest House	J
Wendy House	G
White Lodge	I

RESTAURANTS & BARS

Aao	10
Ad Makers	12
Anna's Café	14
Bali	11
Brown Sugar	19
Concept CM2	5
Curries & More	13
Dallas Pub	3
Genji	C
Gianni	6
Hard Rock Café	8
Inter	9
Ma Be Ba	15
Pisces	2
Sarah Jane's	16
Saxophone	1
Sorn's	2
Syn Bar	C
Thang Long	18
Vanilla Industry	7
Whole Earth	17
WOC	4

If you're heading downtown from Banglamphu, allow at least an hour to get to any of the places mentioned here by **bus**. Depending on the time of day, it may be quicker to take an **express boat** downriver, and then change onto the **Skytrain**. It might also be worth considering the regular **longtails** on Khlong Saen Saeb, which runs parallel to Thanon Phetchaburi. They start at the Golden Mount, near Democracy Monument, and have useful stops at Saphan Hua Chang on Thanon Phrayathai (for Jim Thompson's House) and Pratunam (for the Erawan Shrine).

Jim Thompson's House

Just off Siam Square at the north end of Soi Kasemsan 2, Thanon Rama I, and served by the National Stadium Skytrain station, **Jim Thompson's House** (daily from 9am, viewing on frequent 30–40min guided tours in several languages, last tour 5pm; B100, students & under-25s B50; Ⓦwww.jimthompsonhouse.org) is a kind of Ideal Home in elegant Thai style, and a peaceful refuge from downtown chaos. The house was the residence of the legendary American adventurer, entrepreneur, art collector and all-round character whose mysterious disappearance in the jungles of Malaysia in 1967 has made him even more of a legend among Thailand's farang community.

Apart from putting together this beautiful home, Thompson's most concrete contribution was to turn traditional silk-weaving from a dying art into the highly successful international industry it is today. The complex now includes a **shop** (closes 6pm), part of the Jim Thompson Thai Silk Company chain (see p.180), above which a new **gallery** hosts temporary exhibitions on textiles and the arts, such as royal maps of Siam in the nineteenth century. There's also an excellent **bar-restaurant** (last food orders 4.30pm), which serves a similar menu to *Jim Thompson's Saladaeng Café* (see p.167). Ignore any con men at the entrance to the soi looking for mugs to escort on rip-off shopping trips; they'll tell you that the house is closed when it isn't.

The grand, rambling **house** is in fact a combination of six teak houses, some from as far afield as Ayutthaya and most more than two hundred years old. Like all traditional houses, they were built in wall sections hung together without nails on a frame of wooden pillars, which made it easy to dismantle them, pile them onto a barge and float them to their new location. Although he had trained as an architect, Thompson had more difficulty in putting them back together again; in the end, he had to go back to Ayutthaya to hunt down a group of carpenters who still practised the old house-building methods. Thompson added a few unconventional touches of his own, incorporating the elaborately carved front wall of a Chinese pawnshop between the drawing room and the bedroom, and reversing the other walls in the drawing room so that their carvings faced into the room.

The impeccably tasteful **interior** has been left as it was during Thompson's life, even down to the cutlery on the dining table. Complementing the fine artefacts from throughout Southeast Asia is a stunning array of Thai arts and crafts, including one of the best collections of traditional Thai paintings in the world. Thompson picked up plenty of bargains from the Thieves' Quarter (Nakhon Kasem) in Chinatown, before collecting Thai art became fashionable and expensive. Other pieces were liberated from decay and destruction in upcountry temples, while many of the Buddha images were turned over by ploughs, especially around Ayutthaya. Some of the exhibits are very rare, such as a headless but elegant seventh-century Dvaravati Buddha and a seventeenth-century Ayutthayan teak Buddha, but Thompson also bought pieces of little value and fakes simply for their looks – a shopping strategy that's all the more sensible in the jungle of today's Thai antiques trade.

After the guided tour, you're free to wander round the former rice barn and gardener's and maid's houses in the small **garden**, which display some gorgeous traditional Thai paintings and drawings, as well as small-scale statues and Chinese ceramics.

Siam Ocean World

Spreading over two spacious basement floors of the Siam Paragon shopping centre on Thanon Rama I, **Siam Ocean World** is a highly impressive, Australian-built aquarium (daily 9am–10pm, last admission 9pm; B450, children between 80 and 120cm tall B280; audioguide B100; Ⓦwww.siamoceanworld.com). Despite the relatively high admission price, it gets packed at weekends and during holidays, and there are often long queues for the twenty-minute glass-bottomed boat rides (B150), which give a behind-the-scenes look at the aquarium's workings. Among other outstanding features of this US$30-million development are an eight-metre-deep glass-walled tank, which displays the multi-coloured variety of a coral reef drop-off to great effect, touch tanks for handling starfish, and a long, under-ocean tunnel where you can watch sharks and rays swimming over your head. In this global piscatorial display of around 400 species, locals such as the Mekong giant catfish and the Siamese tigerfish are not forgotten, while regularly spaced touch-screen terminals allow you to glean further information in English about the creatures on view. Popular daily highlights include shark feeds, currently at 1.30pm and 5.30pm, and it's even possible to dive with the sharks here, costing from B5300 for an experienced diver to B6600 for a first-timer (Ⓦwww.sharkdive.org).

The Erawan Shrine

For a glimpse of the variety and ubiquity of Thai religion, drop in on the **Erawan Shrine** (*Saan Phra Prom* in Thai), at the corner of Thanon Ploenchit and Thanon Rajdamri underneath Chit Lom Skytrain station. Remarkable as much for its setting as anything else, this shrine to Brahma, the ancient Hindu creation god, and Erawan, his elephant, squeezes in on one of the busiest and noisiest corners of modern Bangkok, in the shadow of the *Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel* – whose existence is the reason for the shrine. When a string of calamities held up the building of the original hotel in the 1950s, spirit doctors were called in, who instructed the owners to build a new home for the offended local spirits: the hotel was then finished without further mishap. Ill fortune struck the shrine itself, however, in early 2006, when a young, mentally disturbed, Muslim man smashed the Brahma statue to pieces with a hammer – and was then brutally beaten to death by an angry mob. It's expected that an exact replica of the statue will quickly be installed, incorporating the remains of the old statue to preserve the spirit of the deity.

Be prepared for sensory overload here: the main structure shines with lurid glass of all colours and the overcrowded precinct around it is almost buried under scented garlands and incense candles. You might also catch a lacklustre group of traditional dancers performing here to the strains of a small classical orchestra – worshippers hire them to give thanks for a stroke of good fortune. To increase their future chances of such good fortune, visitors buy a bird or two from the flocks incarcerated in cages here; the bird-seller transfers the requested number of captives to a tiny hand-held cage, from which the customer duly liberates the animals, thereby accruing merit. People set on less abstract rewards will invest in a lottery ticket from one of the physically handicapped sellers: they're thought to be the luckiest you can buy.

Suan Pakkad Palace Museum

The **Suan Pakkad Palace Museum** (daily 9am–4pm; B100; Ⓦwww.suanpakkad.com), five minutes' walk from Phaya Thai Skytrain station, at 352–4 Thanon Sri Ayutthaya, stands on what was once a cabbage patch but is now one of the finest gardens in Bangkok. Most of this private collection of beautiful Thai objects from all periods is displayed in four groups of traditional wooden houses, which were transported to Bangkok from various parts of the country. You can either take a guided tour in English (free) or explore the loosely arranged collection yourself (a leaflet and bamboo fan are handed out at the ticket office, and some of the exhibits are labelled). The attached **Marsi Gallery**, in the modern Chumbhot-Pantip Center of Arts on the east side of the garden, displays some interesting temporary exhibitions of contemporary art (Ⓣ02 246 1775–6 for details).

The highlight of Suan Pakkad is the renovated **Lacquer Pavilion**, across the reedy pond at the back of the grounds. Set on stilts, the pavilion is actually an amalgam of two eighteenth- or late-seventeenth-century temple buildings, a *ho trai* (library) and a *ho khien* (writing room), one inside the other, which were found between Ayutthaya and Bang Pa-In. The interior walls are beautifully decorated with gilt on black lacquer: the upper panels depict the life of the Buddha while the lower ones show scenes from the *Ramayana*. Look out especially for the grisly details in the tableau on the back wall, showing the earth goddess drowning the evil forces of Mara. Underneath are depicted some European dandies on horseback, probably merchants, whose presence suggests that the work was executed before the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767.

The carefully observed details of daily life and nature are skilful and lively, especially considering the restraints which the **lacquering technique** places on the artist, who has no opportunity for corrections or touching up. The design has to be punched into a piece of paper, which is then laid on the panel of black lacquer (a kind of plant resin); a small bag of chalk dust is pressed on top so that the dust penetrates the minute holes in the paper, leaving a line of dots on the lacquer to mark the pattern; a gummy substance is then applied to any background areas that are to remain black, before the whole surface is covered in microscopically thin squares of gold leaf; thin sheets of blotting paper, sprinkled with water, are then laid over the panel, which when pulled off bring away the gummy substance and the unwanted pieces of gold leaf. This leaves the rest of the gold decoration in high relief against the black background.

Divided between House no. 8 and the Ban Chiang Gallery in the Chumbhot-Pantip Center of Arts is a very good collection of elegant, whorled pottery and bronze jewellery, which the former owner of Suan Pakkad Palace, Princess Chumbhot, excavated from tombs at Ban Chiang, the major Bronze Age settlement in the northeast. Scattered around the rest of the museum are some attractive Thai and Khmer religious sculptures among an eclectic jumble of artefacts, including fine ceramics and some intriguing kiln-wasters, failed pots which have melted together in the kiln to form weird, almost rubbery pieces of sculpture; an extensive collection of colourful papier-mâché *khon* masks; beautiful betel-nut sets; monks' elegant ceremonial fans; and some rich teak carvings, including a 200-year-old temple door showing episodes from *Sang Thong*, a folk tale about a childless king and queen who discover a handsome son in a conch shell.

Patpong

Concentrated into a small area between the eastern ends of Thanon Silom and Thanon Suriwong, the neon-lit go-go bars of the **Patpong** district loom like rides in a tawdry sexual Disneyland. In front of each bar, girls cajole passers-by with a lifeless sensuality while insistent touts proffer printed menus and photographs detailing the degradations on show. Inside, bikini-clad women gyrate to Western music and play hostess to the (almost exclusively male) spectators; upstairs, live shows feature women who, to use Spalding Gray's phrase in *Swimming to Cambodia*, "do everything with their vaginas except have babies". See the box on p.156.

Patpong was no more than a sea of mud when the capital was founded on the marshy river bank to the west, but by the 1960s it had grown into a flash district of nightclubs and dance halls for rich Thais, owned by a Chinese millionaire godfather who gave his name to the area. In 1969, an American entrepreneur turned an existing teahouse into a luxurious nightclub to satisfy the tastes of soldiers on R&R trips from Vietnam, and so Patpong's transformation into a Western sex reservation began. At first, the area was rough and violent, but over the years it has wised up to the desires of the affluent farang, and now markets itself as a packaged concept of Oriental decadence. The centre of the skin trade lies along the interconnected sois of **Patpong 1 and 2**, where lines of go-go bars share their patch with respectable restaurants, a 24-hour supermarket and an overabundance of pharmacies. By night, it's a thumping theme park, whose blazing neon promises tend towards self-parody, with names like *Thigh Bar* and *Chicken Divine*. Budget travellers, purposeful businessmen and noisy lager louts throng the streets, and even the most demure tourists – of both sexes – turn out to do some shopping at the night market down the middle of Patpong 1, where hawkers sell fake watches, bags and designer T-shirts. By day, a relaxed hangover descends on the place. Bar-girls hang out at foodstalls and cafés in respectable dress, often recognizable by faces that are pinched and strained from the continuous use of antibiotics and heroin in an attempt to ward off venereal disease and boredom. Farang men slump at the bars on Patpong 2, drinking and watching videos, unable to find anything else to do in the whole of Bangkok.

The small dead-end alley to the east of Patpong 2, **Silom 4** (ie Soi 4, Thanon Silom), hosts some of Bangkok's hippest nightlife, its bars, clubs and pavements heaving at weekends with the capital's bright young things. Several gay venues can be found on Silom 4, but the focus of the scene has shifted to **Silom 2**, while in between, **Thanon Thaniya**'s hostess bars and restaurants cater to Japanese tourists.

M.R. Kukrit's Heritage Home

Ten minutes' walk south of Thanon Sathorn and twenty minutes from Chong Nonsi Skytrain station, at 19 Soi Phra Pinit (Soi 7, Thanon Narathiwat Ratchanakharin), lies **M.R. Kukrit's Heritage Home**, the beautiful traditional house and gardens of one of Thailand's leading figures of the twentieth century (*Baan Mom Kukrit*; Sat, Sun & public hols 10am–5pm; B50). M.R. (*Mom Rajawongse*, a princely title) **Kukrit Pramoj** (1911–95) was a remarkable all-rounder, descended from Rama II on his father's side and, on his mother's side, from the influential ministerial family, the Bunnags. Kukrit graduated in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from Oxford University and went on to become a university lecturer back in Thailand, but his greatest claim to fame is probably as a writer: he founded, owned and penned a daily column for *Siam Rath*, the most influential Thai-language newspaper, and wrote short stories, novels, plays and poetry. He was also a respected performer in classical dance-drama (*khon*),

Thailand's sex industry

Bangkok owes its reputation as the carnal capital of the world to a highly efficient sex industry adept at peddling fantasies of cheap sex on tap. More than a thousand sex-related businesses operate in the city, but the gaudy neon fleshpots of Patpong give a misleading impression of an activity that is deeply rooted in Thai culture – the overwhelming majority of Thailand's prostitutes of both sexes (estimated at anywhere between 200,000 and 700,000) work with Thai men, not farangs.

Prostitution and polygamy have long been intrinsic to the Thai way of life. Until Rama VI broke with the custom in 1910, Thai kings had always kept a retinue of concubines around them, a select few of whom would be elevated to the status of wife and royal mother, the rest forming a harem of ladies-in-waiting and sexual playthings. The practice was aped by the status-hungry nobility and, from the early nineteenth century, by newly rich merchants keen to have lots of sons and heirs. Though the monarch is now monogamous, many men of all classes still keep mistresses, known as *mia noi* (minor wives), a tradition bolstered by the popular philosophy that an official wife (*mia luang*) should be treated like the temple's main Buddha image – respected and elevated upon the altar – whereas the minor wife is an amulet, to be taken along wherever you go. For those not wealthy enough to take on *mia noi*, prostitution is a far less costly and equally accepted option. Statistics indicate that at least two-fifths of sexually active Thai men are thought to use the services of prostitutes twice a month on average, and it's common practice for a night out with the boys to wind up in a brothel or massage parlour.

The **farang sex industry** is a relatively new development, having had its start during the Vietnam War, when the American military set up seven bases around Thailand. The GIs' appetite for "entertainment" fuelled the creation of instant red-light districts near the bases, attracting women from surrounding rural areas to cash in on the boom; Bangkok joined the fray in 1967, when the US secured the right to ferry soldiers in from Vietnam for R&R breaks. By the mid-1970s, the bases had been evacuated, but the sex infrastructure remained and tourists moved in to fill the vacuum, lured by advertising that diverted most of the traffic to Bangkok and Pattaya. Sex tourism has since grown to become an established part of the Thai economy and has spread to Phuket and Ko Samui.

The majority of the women who work in the Patpong bars come from the poorest rural areas of north and northeast Thailand. **Economic refugees** in search of a better life, they're easily drawn into an industry in which they can make in a single night what it takes a month to earn in the rice fields. In some Isaan villages, money sent home by prostitutes in Bangkok far exceeds financial aid given by the government. Women from rural communities have always been expected to contribute an equal share to the family income, and many opt for a couple of lucrative years in the sex bars and brothels as the most effective way of helping to pay off family debts and improve the living conditions of parents stuck in the poverty trap. Reinforcing this

and he starred as an Asian prime minister, opposite Marlon Brando, in the Hollywood film, *The Ugly American*. In 1974, during an especially turbulent period for Thailand, life imitated art, when Kukrit was called on to become Thailand's PM at the head of a coalition of seventeen parties. However, just four hundred days into his premiership, the Thai military leadership dismissed him for being too anti-American.

The **residence**, which has been left just as it was when Kukrit was alive, reflects his complex character. In the large, open-sided *sala* (pavilion) for public functions near the entrance is an attractive display of *khon* masks, including a gold one which Kukrit wore when he played the demon king, Totsagan (Ravana).

social obligation is the pervasive Buddhist notion of karma, which holds that your lot, however unhappy, is the product of past-life misdeeds and can only be improved by making sufficient merit to ensure a better life next time round.

While most women enter the racket presumably knowing at least something of what lies ahead, younger girls definitely do not. **Child prostitution** is rife: an estimated ten percent of prostitutes are under 14, some are as young as 9. They are valuable property: a prepubescent virgin can be rented to her first customer for US$1000, as sex with someone so young is believed by some to have rejuvenating properties. Most child prostitutes have been sold by desperate parents as **bonded slaves** to pimps or agents, and are kept locked up until they have fully repaid the money given to their parents, which may take two or more years.

Despite its ubiquity, prostitution has been **illegal** in Thailand since 1960, but sex-industry bosses easily circumvent the law by registering their establishments as bars, restaurants, barbers, nightclubs or massage parlours, and making payoffs to the police. Sex workers, on the other hand, often endure exploitation and violence from employers, pimps and customers rather than face fines and long rehabilitation sentences in prison-like reform centres. Life is made even more difficult by the fact that abortion is illegal in Thailand. A 1996 amendment to the **anti-prostitution law** attempts to treat sex workers as victims rather than criminals, penalizing parents who sell their children to the flesh trade and punishing owners, managers and customers of any place of prostitution with a jail sentence or a heavy fine, but this has reportedly been haphazardly enforced, owing to the number of influential police and politicians allegedly involved in the sex industry. Under this amendment anyone caught having sex with an under-15 is charged with rape, though this has apparently resulted in an increase in trafficking of young children from neighbouring countries as they are less likely to seek help.

In recent years, the spectre of **AIDS** has put the problems of the sex industry into sharp focus: UN AIDS statistics from 2003 reported that about one in five sex workers in Thailand was infected with HIV/AIDS and about one in seventy-five of the general adult Thai population; in the same year there were 58,000 AIDS-related deaths in the country. However, the rate of new HIV infections is in decline – down from 143,000 in 1991 to 21,000 in 2003 – thanks to an aggressive, World Health Organization-approved AIDS awareness campaign conducted by the government and the Population and Community Development Association (PDA), a Bangkok-based NGO, a vital component of which was to send health officials into brothels to administer blood tests and give out condoms. Though the government no longer funds many AIDS-awareness initiatives, the high-profile PDA (Ⓦwww.pda.or.th/eng), which also runs the famous *Cabbages and Condoms* restaurant on Thanon Sukhumvit, continues to campaign and educate the public, spurred on by fears that young Thais are too complacent about the virus, and by recent reports of a worrying rise in new infections.

In and around the adjoining Khmer-styled garden, keep your eyes peeled for the *mai dut*, sculpted miniature trees similar to bonsai, some of which Kukrit worked on for decades. The living quarters beyond are made up of five teak houses on stilts, assembled from various parts of central Thailand and joined by an open veranda. The bedroom, study and various sitting rooms are decked out with beautiful *objets d'art*; look out especially for the carved bed that belonged to Rama II and the very delicate, 200-year-old nielloware (gold inlay) from Nakhon Si Thammarat in the formal reception room. In the small family prayer room, Kukrit Pramoj's ashes are enshrined in the base of a reproduction of the Emerald Buddha.

△ *Mai dut*, M.R. Kukrit's Heritage Home

Ban Kamthieng (Kamthieng House)

Another reconstructed traditional Thai residence, **Ban Kamthieng** (Tues–Sat 9am–5pm; B100; Ⓦwww.siam-society.org) was moved in the 1960s from Chiang Mai to 131 Thanon Asok Montri (Soi 21), off Thanon Sukhumvit, and set up as an ethnological museum by the Siam Society. The delightful complex of polished teak buildings makes a pleasing oasis beneath the towering glass skyscrapers that dominate the rest of Sukhumvit, and is easily reached from the Asok Skytrain and Sukhumvit subway stops. It differs from Suan Pakkad, Jim Thompson's House and M.R. Kukrit's Heritage Home in being the home of a rural family, and the objects on display give a fair insight into country life for the well-heeled in northern Thailand.

The house was built on the banks of the Ping River in the mid-nineteenth century, and the ground-level display of farming tools and fish traps evokes the upcountry practice of fishing in flooded rice paddies to supplement the supply from the rivers. Upstairs, the main display focuses on the ritual life of a typical Lanna household, explaining the role of the spirits, the practice of making offerings, and the belief in talismans, magic shirts and male tattoos. The rectangular lintel above the door is a *hum yon*, carved in floral patterns that represent testicles and designed to ward off evil spirits. Walk along the open veranda to the authentically equipped kitchen to see a video lesson in making spicy frog soup, and to the granary to find an interesting exhibition on the ritual practices associated with rice-farming.

Chatuchak and the outskirts

The amorphous clutter of Greater Bangkok doesn't harbour many attractions, but **Chatuchak Weekend Market** and the cultural theme park of **Muang Boran** are both well worth making the effort for.

Chatuchak Weekend Market ("JJ")

With over eight thousand open-air stalls to peruse, and wares as diverse as Lao silk, Siamese kittens and designer lamps to choose from, the enormous **Chatuchak Weekend Market**, or **JJ** as it's usually abbreviated, from "Jatu Jak" (Sat & Sun 7am–6pm), is Bangkok's most enjoyable – and exhausting – shopping experience. It occupies a huge patch of ground between the Northern Bus Terminal and Mo Chit Skytrain (N8)/Chatuchak Park subway stations, and is best reached by Skytrain or subway if you're coming from downtown areas; Kamphaeng Phet subway station is the most convenient as it exits right into the most interesting, southwestern, corner of the market. Coming from Banglamphu, you can either get a bus to the nearest Skytrain stop (probably National Stadium or Ratchathewi) and then take the train, or take the #503 or #509 bus all the way from Rajdamnoen Klang (about 1hr); see p.101 for details.

Though its primary customers are Bangkok residents in search of idiosyncratic fashions and homewares, Chatuchak also has plenty of collector- and tourist-oriented **stalls**. Aside from trendy one-off clothes and accessories, best buys include antique lacquerware, unusual sarongs, traditional cotton clothing and crafts from the north, jeans, silver jewellery, and ceramics, particularly the five-coloured *bencharong*. The market is divided into 26 numbered **sections**, plus a dozen unnumbered ones, each of them more or less dedicated to a particular genre, for example household items, young fashions, plants, second-hand books, or crafts. If you have several hours to spare, it's fun just to browse at whim, but if you're looking for souvenirs, handicrafts or traditional textiles you should start with sections 22, 24, 25 and 26, which are all in a cluster at the southwest (Kamphaeng Phet subway) end of the market; sections A, B and C, behind the market's head office and information centre, are also full of interesting artefacts. *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok* has a fabulously detailed and informatively annotated **map** of all the sections in the market; it's best bought before you arrive but is available at Teak House Art in Section 2, near Kamphaeng Phet subway's exit 2. Maps are also posted at various points around the market and for specific help you can also ask at the market office near Gate 1 off Thanon Kamphaeng Phet 2.

The market also contains a controversial **wildlife** section that has long doubled as a clearing-house for protected and endangered species such as gibbons, palm cockatoos and Indian pied hornbills, many of them smuggled in from Laos and Cambodia and sold to private animal collectors and foreign zoos. The illegal trade goes on beneath the counter, and may be in decline following a spate of crackdowns, but you're bound to come across fighting cocks around the back (demonstrations are almost continuous), miniature flying squirrels being fed milk through pipettes, and iridescent red and blue Siamese fighting fish, kept in individual jars and shielded from each other's aggressive stares by sheets of cardboard.

There's no shortage of **foodstalls** inside the market compound, particularly at the southern end, where you'll find plenty of places serving inexpensive *phat thai* and Isaan snacks. Close by these stalls is a classy little juice bar called *Viva* where you can rest your feet while listening to the manager's jazz tapes. The biggest restaurant here is *Toh Plue*, whose main branch is on the edge of the block containing the market office and makes a good rendezvous point (there's a second branch

△ Chatuchak Weekend Market

beside Kamphaeng Phet subway station's exit 1). For veggie food, head for *Chamlong's* (also known as *Asoke*), an ultra-cheap food-court-style restaurant just outside the market on Thanon Kamphaeng Phet (across Thanon Kamphaeng Phet 2; 5 mins' walk from Kamphaeng Phet subway's exit 1; Sat & Sun 8am–noon). You can **change money** (Sat & Sun 8am–6pm) in the market building at the south end of the market, and there are several ATMs here too. A few very small electric **trams** circulate around the market's main inner ring road, transporting weary shoppers for free, though they always seem to be full.

Muang Boran Ancient City

A day-trip out to the **Muang Boran Ancient City** open-air museum (daily 8am–5pm; B300, children B200 including bicycle rental or tram ticket; Ⓦwww.ancientcity.com), 33km southeast of Bangkok, is a great way to enjoy the best of Thailand's architectural heritage in relative peace and without much effort. Occupying a huge park shaped like Thailand itself, the museum comprises more than 116 traditional Thai buildings scattered around pleasantly landscaped grounds and is best toured by rented **bicycle** (B50; B150/tandem; B200/three-seater), though you can also make use of the circulating **tram** (B150 round trip, kids B75), and doing it on foot is just about possible. Many of the buildings are copies of the country's most famous monuments, and are located in the appropriate "region" of the park, with everything from Bangkok's Grand Palace (central region) to the spectacularly sited hilltop Khmer Khao Phra Viharn sanctuary (northeast) represented here. There are also some original structures, including a rare scripture repository (library) rescued from Samut Songkhram (south), as well as some painstaking reconstructions from contemporary documents of long-vanished gems, of which the Ayutthaya-period Sanphet Prasat palace (central) is a particularly fine example. A sizeable team of restorers and skilled craftspeople maintains the buildings and helps keep some of the traditional techniques alive; if you come here during the week you can watch them at work.

To get to Muang Boran from Bangkok, take air-conditioned **bus** #511 to **Samut Prakan** on the edge of built-up Greater Bangkok, then change onto songthaew #36, which passes the entrance to Muang Boran. Although bus #511 runs from Banglamphu via Thanon Rama I and Thanon Sukhumvit (see p.101 for the route), wherever you're starting from, the journey is likely to be much faster if you cover downtown Bangkok by Skytrain (and boat and/or subway if necessary) and pick up the #511 at the Ekamai Skytrain stop.

Food and entertainment

As you'd expect, nowhere in Thailand can compete with Bangkok's diversity when it comes to eating and entertainment, and, although prices are generally higher here than in the provinces, it's still easy to have a good time while on a budget. Bangkok boasts an astonishing fifty thousand **places to eat** – that's almost one for every hundred citizens – ranging from grubby streetside noodle shops to the most elegant of restaurants. Here we run through the best of the city's indigenous eateries, with a few representatives of the capital's numerous ethnic minorities.

Bangkok nightlife has at last outgrown its reputation for catering only to single men and now centres around dozens of fashionable **bars** and sophisticated **clubs**, where hip design and trend-setting DJs draw in capacity crowds of stylish young Thais and partying travellers. Getting back to your lodgings is no problem in the small hours: many bus routes run a (reduced) service throughout the night, and tuk-tuks and taxis are always at hand – though it's probably best for unaccompanied women to avoid using tuk-tuks late at night.

Introductions to more traditional elements of Thai culture are offered by the raucous ambience of the city's **boxing arenas**, its **music and dancing** troupes and its profusion of **shops**, stalls and markets – all of them covered here.

Eating

Thai eateries of all types are found all over Bangkok. The best **gourmet Thai** restaurants in the country operate from the downtown districts around Thanon Sukhumvit and Thanon Silom, proffering wonderful royal, traditional and regional cuisines that definitely merit a visit. Over in Banglamphu, Thanon Phra Athit has become famous for its dozen or so trendy little restaurant-bars, each with distinctive decor and a contemporary Thai menu that's angled at young Thai diners. At the other end of the scale there are the **night markets** and **street stalls**, so numerous in Bangkok that we can only flag the most promising areas – but wherever you're staying, you'll hardly have to walk a block in any direction before encountering something appealing.

For the non-Thai cuisines, Chinatown naturally rates as the most authentic district for pure **Chinese** food; likewise neighbouring Pahurat, the capital's Indian enclave, is best for unadulterated **Indian** dishes; and good, comparatively cheap **Japanese** restaurants are concentrated on Soi Thaniya, at the east end of Thanon

Silom. The place to head for Western, **travellers' food** – from herbal teas and hamburgers to muesli – as well as a hearty range of veggie options, is Thanon Khao San, packed with small, inexpensive tourist restaurants; standards vary, but there are some definite gems among the blander establishments.

Besides the night markets and street stalls, **fast food** comes in two main forms: the Thai version is the upper-floor **food courts** of shopping centres and department stores all over the city, dishing up mostly one-dish meals from around the country, while the old Western favourites like *McDonald's* and *KFC* mainly congregate around Thanon Sukhumvit and Siam Square. In addition, downtown Bangkok has a good quota of **coffee shops**, including several branches of local company *Black Canyon* and *Starbucks*, the latter expensive but usually graced with armchairs and free newspapers.

In the more expensive restaurants listed below you may have to pay a ten percent service charge and seven percent government tax. Telephone numbers are given for the more popular or out-of-the-way establishments, where booking may be advisable. Most restaurants in Bangkok are open every day for lunch and dinner; we've noted exceptions in the listings below.

Banglamphu and the Democracy Monument area

Around Khao San

Chabad House 96 Thanon Ram Bhuttri ⓦwww.jewishthailand.com. A little piece of Israel, run by the Bangkok branch of the Jewish Chabad-Lubavitch movement. Serves a well-priced kosher menu (B75–130) of falafels, baba ganoush, schnitzels, hummus, salads and Jewish breads in air-conditioned calm, on the ground floor of a long-established community centre and guest house. Sun–Thurs 10am–10pm, Fri 10am–3pm.

Himalayan Kitchen 1 Thanon Khao San. One of only a handful of places serving South Asian food in the area, this first-floor restaurant – which gives good bird's-eye views of Khao San action – is decorated with Nepalese *thanka* paintings and dishes out decent Nepalese veg and non-veg thalis (from B160).

May Kaidee 117/1Thanon Tanao, though actually on the parallel soi to the west; easiest access is to take first left on Soi Damnoen Klang Neua; ⓦwww.maykaidee.com. Simple, neighbourhood restaurant serving the best vegetarian food in Banglamphu. Try the tasty green curry with coconut, the Vietnamese-style veggie spring rolls or the sticky black-rice pudding. May Kaidee herself also runs veggie cookery classes, detailed on p.188. Most dishes B50–60.

Popaing Soi Ram Bhuttri. Popular place for cheap seafood: mussels and cockles cost just B50 per plate, squid B70, or you can get a large helping of seafood noodles for B100. Eat in the low-rent restaurant area or on the street beneath the temple wall.

Prakorb House Thanon Khao San. Archetypal, inexpensive, travellers' haven, with only a few tables, and an emphasis on wholesome ingredients. Herbal teas, mango shakes, delicious pumpkin curry, and lots more besides (B40–60).

Srinnmmun Bar and Restaurant 335 Thanon Ram Bhuttri. This funky little cabin of a place with just a handful of tables and a penchant for soft country music serves delicious Thai food (cooked on the street), especially shrimps drizzled with coconut sauce, spicy *yam* salads and stir-fried veg with pineapple, cashews and tofu. Most dishes B40–60. Cheap.

Sunset Bar Sunset Street, 197–201 Thanon Khao San. Turning off Khao San at the Sunset Street sign, ignore the street-view tables of *Sabai Bar* and follow the narrow passageway as it opens out into a tranquil, shrub-filled courtyard, occupied by the *Sunset Bar* coffee shop and restaurant – the perfect place to escape the Khao San hustle with a mid-priced juice or snack. The courtyard's handsome, mango-coloured, 1907 villa is another enticement: a discreet branch of *Starbucks*, complete with sofas, occupies its ground floor, while the upper floor is given over to the Kraichitti Gallery, a commercial art outlet.

Tom Yam Kung Thanon Khao San. Occasionally mouth-blastingly authentic Thai food served in the courtyard of a beautiful early-twentieth-century villa that's hidden behind Khao San's modern clutter. The menu (B60–150) includes spicy fried catfish, coconut-palm curry with tofu and shrimps in sugar cane. Well-priced cocktails, draught beer and a small wine list. Open 24hr.

Phra Athit area

Hemlock 56 Thanon Phra Athit, next door but one from *Pra Arthit Mansion*; the sign is visible from the road but not from the pavement Ⓣ 02 282 7507. Small, stylish, highly recommended air-con restaurant that's very popular with students and young Thai couples. Offers a long and interesting menu of unusual Thai dishes (mostly about B60), including banana-flower salad (*yam hua plii*), coconut and mushroom curry, grand lotus rice and various larb and fish dishes. The traditional *miang* starters (shiny green wild tea leaves filled with chopped vegetables, fish and meat) are also very tasty, and there's a good vegetarian selection. Mon–Sat 5pm–midnight; worth reserving a table on Friday and Saturday nights.

Krua Nopparat 130–132 Thanon Phra Athit. The decor in this unassuming air-con restaurant is noticeably plain compared to all the arty joints on this road, but the Thai food (B60–100) is good, especially the aubergine wing-bean salad and the battered crab.

Ricky's Coffee Shop 22 Thanon Phra Athit. With its atmospherically dark woodwork, red lanterns and marble-top tables, this contemporary take on a traditional Chinese coffee house is an enjoyable spot to idle over fresh coffee (choose from several blends: B50) and feast on the deli-style offerings – pastrami, imported cheeses – served over baguettes and croissants, not to mention the all-day breakfasts and veggie lunch menu (most dishes B70–120). Daily 7.30am–8pm.

Roti Mataba 136 Thanon Phra Athit. Famous outlet for the ever-popular fried Indian breads, or rotis, served here in lots of sweet and savoury varieties, including with vegetable and meat curries, and with bananas and condensed milk (from B20). Closed Sun.

Tonpoh Thanon Phra Athit, next to Tha Phra Athit express-boat pier. Sizeable, good-value seafood menu (B60–220) and a relatively scenic riverside location; good place for a beer and a snack at the end of a long day's sightseeing.

Thanon Samsen, Thewes and the fringes

In Love Beside the Tha Thewes express-boat pier at 2/1 Thanon Krung Kasem. Popular place for seafood – and riverine breezes – with decent Chao Phraya views, an airy upstairs terrace, and a huge menu including baked cottonfish in mango sauce, steamed sea bass with lime and chilli, and *tom yam kung*. Most dishes B160–190.

Isaan restaurants Behind the Rajdamnoen Boxing Stadium on Thanon Rajdamnoen Nok. A cluster of restaurants serving cheapish northeastern fare (from B60) to hungry boxing fans: take your pick for hearty plates of *kai yang* and *khao niaw*.

Kaloang Beside the river at the far western end of Thanon Sri Ayutthaya. Flamboyant service and excellent seafood attracts an almost exclusively Thai clientele to this open-air riverside restaurant. Dishes (from B120–250) well worth shelling out for include the fried rolled shrimps served with a sweet dip, the roast squid cooked in a piquant sauce and the steamed butter fish.

Kinlom Chom Saphan Riverside end of Thanon Samsen Soi 3. This sprawling, waterside seafood restaurant boasts close-up views of the lyre-like Rama VIII Bridge and is always busy with a youngish Thai crowd. The predominantly seafood menu (from B120–250) features everything from crab to grouper cooked in multiple ways, including with curry, garlic or sweet basil sauces. As well as the usual complement of tom yam and *tom kha* soups, there are yam salads and meat options including stir-fried ostrich with herbs. Daily 11am–2am.

May Kaidee 2 33 Thanon Samsen, between the khlong and Soi 1 Ⓦ www.maykaidee.com. This air-con branch of Banglamphu's best loved Thai veggie restaurant may lack the ad-hoc character of the original (see opposite), but the menu is the same – pumpkin soup, banana flower salad, curry-fried tofu with vegetables – and equally cheap (most dishes B50–60). See p.188 for details of owner May Kaidee's veggie cookery classes.

Na Pralan Café Almost opposite the main entrance to the Grand Palace, Thanon Na Phra Lan. Technically in Ratanakosin (it's marked on the map on p.124) but very close to Banglamphu, this small, cheap café, only a couple of doors up the street from the Silpakorn University Art College, is ideally placed for refreshment after your tour of the Grand Palace. Popular with students, it occupies a quaint old air-con shophouse with battered, artsy decor. The menu, well thought out with some unusual twists, offers mostly one-dish meals with rice, and a range of ice creams, coffees, teas and beers. Mon–Sat 10am–midnight, Sun 10am–6pm.

Pornsawan Vegetarian Restaurant 80 Thanon Samsen, between sois 4 and 6. Cheap, no-frills Thai veggie café that uses soya products instead of meat in its curries and stir-fries. Daily 7am–6.30pm

Shanti Lodge 37 Soi 16,Thanon Sri Ayutthaya. The restaurant attached to the famously chilled-out guest house serves an exceptionally innovative menu of predominantly vegetarian dishes, including tofu stuffed with brown rice, assorted curries and vegetables; and mushroom larb. Most dishes around B75.

Chinatown and Pahurat

The places listed below are marked on the map on p.140.

Chong Tee 84 Soi Sukon 1, Thanon Trimit, between Hualamphong Station and Wat Traimit. Delicious and moreishly cheap pork satay and sweet toast.

Hua Seng Hong 371 Thanon Yaowarat. Thai birds' nest soup is one of the specialities here, but locals tend to go for the tasty wonton noodle soup or the stir-fried crab noodles (dishes from B160).

T&K (Toi & Kid's Seafood) 49 Soi Phadungdao, just off Thanon Yaowarat. Famously good barbecued seafood, with everything from prawns (B150 a serving) to oysters (B30 each) on offer. Daily 4.30pm–2am.

Royal India Just off Thanon Chakraphet at 392/1. Famously good curries (from B60) served in the heart of Bangkok's most Indian of neighbourhoods to an almost exclusively South Asian clientele. Especially renowned for its choice Indian breads.

Shangri-La 306 Thanon Yaowarat (cnr of Thanon Rajawong). Cavernous place serving Chinese classics (B80–300), including lots of seafood, and lunchtime *dim sum*. Very popular, especially for family outings.

White Orchid Hotel 409–421 Thanon Yaowarat. Recommended for its *dim sum*, with bamboo baskets of prawn dumplings, spicy spare ribs, stuffed beancurd and the like, served in three different portion sizes at fairly high prices. *Dim sum* 11am–2pm & 5–10pm. All-you-can-eat lunchtime buffets also worth stopping by for.

Downtown: Around Siam Square and Thanon Ploenchit

The map on p.151 shows the places listed below. In this area, there are also branches of *Anna's Café* (see p.166), in Diethelm Tower B, Thanon Witthayu (☎02 252 0864), and *Aoi* (see p.166), in the Siam Paragon shopping centre on Thanon Rama I (☎02 129 4348).

Aao 45/4–8 Soi Lang Suan, Thanon Ploenchit ☎02 254 5699. Bright, almost unnerving retro-Sixties decor is the setting for friendly service and very tasty Thai dishes – notably *kaeng phanaeng kai* (B90) and wing-bean salad – most of which are available spiced to order and/or in vegetarian versions. Closed Sun.

Bali 15/3 Soi Ruam Rudee ☎02 250 0711. Top-notch, moderately priced Indonesian food in a cosy nook. Blow out on seven-course *rijsttafel* for B340. Closed Sun.

Curries & More 63/3 Soi Ruam Rudee ☎02 253 5408–9. And a whole lot more . . . this offshoot of *Baan Khanitha* (see p.168) offers something for everyone, including European-style fish, steaks and pasta, as well as curries from around the country (from around B300). Try the delicious *chu chi khung nang*, deep-fried freshwater prawns with mild, Indian-style curry, or the prawn and pomelo salad. The modern, white-painted interior is hung

Yellow-flag heaven for veggies

Every autumn, for nine days during the ninth lunar month (October or November), Thailand's Chinese community goes on a **meat-free** diet in order to mark the onset of the Vegetarian Festival (Ngan Kin Jeh), a sort of Taoist version of Lent. Though the Chinese citizens of Bangkok don't go in for skewering themselves like their compatriots in Trang and Phuket (see p.395), they do celebrate the Vegetarian Festival with gusto: some people choose to wear only white for the duration, all the temples throng with activity, and nearly every restaurant and foodstall in Chinatown turns vegetarian for the period, flying small yellow flags to show that they are upholding the tradition. For vegetarian tourists this is a great time to be in town – just look for the yellow flag and you can be sure all dishes will be one hundred percent vegan. Soya substitutes are a popular feature on the vegetarian Chinese menu, so don't be surprised to find pink prawn-shaped objects floating in your noodle soup or unappetizingly realistic slices of fake duck. Many hotel restaurants also get in on the act during the Vegetarian Festival, running special veggie promotions for a week or two.

with contemporary paintings, but the garden, surrounded by waterfalls and with water flowing over the transparent roof, is the place to be.

Food for Fun Floor 4, Siam Center. Highly enjoyable, inexpensive, new food court, decorated in startling primary colours. Lots of traditional Thai drinks and all manner of tasty one-dish meals – *khao man kai*, *khanom jiin* and *laab* and *som tam* from the Isaan counter – as well as pizza, pastas, Vietnamese and Korean food.

Food Loft Floor 7, Central Chidlom, Thanon Ploenchit. Bangkok's top department store lays on a suitably upscale food court of all hues – Thai, Vietnamese, Malay, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Italian. Choose your own ingredients and watch them cooked in front of you, eat in the stylish, minimalist seating areas and then ponder whether you have room for a Thai or Western dessert.

Genji *Swissôtel NaiLert Park*, 2 Thanon Witthayu ☎02 253 0123. Excellent, genteel Japanese restaurant overlooking the hotel's beautiful gardens, with a sushi bar, teppan-yaki grill tables and private dining rooms. The sushi and tempura set menu (B900) is especially delicious.

Gianni 34/1 Soi Tonson, Thanon Ploenchit ☎02 252 1619. One of Bangkok's best independent Italian restaurants, successfully blending traditional and modern in both its decor and food. Offerings include a belt- (and bank-) busting tasting menu for B1190 and innovative pastas.

Inter 432/1–2 Soi 9, Siam Square. Honest, efficient Thai restaurant that's popular with students and shoppers, serving good one-dish meals for around B50, as well as curries, salads and Isaan food, in a no-frills, fluorescent-lit canteen atmosphere.

Ma Be Ba 93 Soi Lang Suan ☎02 254 9595. Lively, spacious and extravagantly decorated Italian restaurant dishing up a good variety of antipasti, excellent pastas (around B300 and upwards) and pizzas (in two sizes), and traditional main courses strong on seafood. Live music nightly, mostly pop covers, country and Latin, plus jazz piano early evenings Wed–Fri.

Mah Boon Krong Food Centre North end of Floor 6, MBK shopping centre, corner of Thanon Rama I and Thanon Phrayathai. Increase your knowledge of Thai food here: ingredients, names and pictures of a wide variety of tasty, cheap one-dish meals from all over the country are displayed at the various stalls, as well as fresh juices and a wide range of desserts. Other cuisines, such as Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, Japanese and Italian are now also represented, charging slightly higher prices.

Pisces 36/6 Soi Kasemsan 1, Thanon Rama I. Drawing plenty of custom from the local guest houses, a friendly, family-run restaurant, neat and colourful, serving a wide variety of breakfasts and cheap, tasty Thai food, with lots of vegetarian options. Daily 8am–1pm & 5–10.30pm.

Sarah Jane's Ground Floor, Sindhorn Tower 1, 130–132 Thanon Witthayu ☎02 650 9992–3. Long-standing restaurant, popular with Bangkok's Isaan population, serving excellent, simple north-eastern dishes, as well as Italian food. It's in slick but unfussy modern premises that can be slightly tricky to find at night, towards the rear of a modern office block. Moderate.

Sorn's 36/8 Soi Kasemsan 1, Thanon Rama I. In this quiet lane of superior guest houses, a laid-back, moderately priced hangout decorated with black-and-white prints of Thailand by the photographer owner. Delicious versions of standard Thai dishes – the *tom kha kai* is especially good – as well as Western meals, a huge breakfast menu including reasonably priced set meals, and good teas and coffees. Daily 7am–noon & 5–11pm.

Thang Long 82/5 Soi Lang Suan ☎02 251 3504. Excellent Vietnamese food, such as lemon grass fish (B175) in this stylish, minimalist and popular restaurant, all stone floors, plants and whitewashed walls.

Vanilla Industry Soi 11, Siam Square. Small, sophisticated, good-value, first-floor restaurant that's a shrine to Western gourmet delights (backed up by a cookery school on the floor above): smoked salmon finger sandwiches, spot-on desserts such as strawberry panna cotta, pastas, salads and other main courses, and excellent teas and coffees.

Whole Earth 93/3 Soi Lang Suan ☎02 252 5574. Long-standing veggie-oriented restaurant, serving interesting and varied Thai and Indian-style dishes (B100 and under) for both vegetarians and omnivores in a relaxing atmosphere.

Zen Floor 6, Central World Plaza, corner of Thanon Ploenchit and Thanon Rajdamri ☎02 255 6462; Floor 3, MBK shopping centre, corner of Thanon Rama I and Thanon Phrayathai ☎02 620 9007–8; and Floor 4, Siam Center, Thanon Rama I ☎02 658 1183–4. Good-value Japanese restaurant with wacky modern wooden design and seductive booths. Among a huge range of dishes, the complete meal sets (with pictures to help you choose) are filling and particularly good.

Downtown: south of Thanon Rama IV

The places listed below are marked on the maps on p.92, p.117 and p.118. In this area, there are also branches of *Baan Khanitha* (see p.168) at 67 Thanon Sathorn Tai, at the corner of Soi Suan Phlu (Ⓣ02 675 4200), and *Zen* (see p.165), at 1/1 Thanon Convent (Ⓣ02 266 7150–1).

Angelini's *Shangri-La Hotel*, 89 Soi Wat Suan Plu, Thanon Charoen Krung Ⓣ02 236 7777. One of the capital's best Italians, pricey but not too extravagant. The setting is lively and relaxed, with open-plan kitchen and big picture windows onto the pool and river. There are some unusual main courses as well as old favourites like *ossobucco*, or you can invent your own wood-oven-baked pizza.

Anna's Café 118 Thanon Saladaeng Ⓣ02 632 0619–20. In a large, elegant villa between Silom and Sathorn roads, reliable, varied and very reasonably priced Thai and Western dishes and desserts, including a very good *som tam*, *kai yaang* and sticky rice combo.

Aoi 132/10–11 Soi 6, Thanon Silom Ⓣ02 235 2321–2. The best place in town for a Japanese blowout, justifiably popular with the expat community. Excellent authentic food and elegant decor. Good-value lunch sets (from B250) available and a superb sushi bar.

Ban Chiang 14 Soi Srivieng, off Thanon Surasak, between Thanon Silom and Thanon Sathorn Ⓣ02 236 7045. Fine, reasonably priced central and northeastern Thai cuisine in an elegant, surprisingly quiet wooden house with garden tables.

Celadon *Sukhothai Hotel*, 13/3 Thanon Sathorn Tai Ⓣ02 287 0222. Consistently rated as one of the best hotel restaurants in Bangkok and a favourite with locals, serving outstanding traditional and contemporary Thai food in an elegant setting surrounded by lotus ponds.

Chai Karr 312/3 Thanon Silom, opposite *Holiday Inn* Ⓣ02 233 2549. Folksy, traditional-style wooden decor is the welcoming setting for a wide variety of well-prepared, modestly priced Thai and Chinese dishes, followed by home-made coconut ice cream. Closed Sun.

Charuvan 70–2 Thanon Silom, near the entrance to Soi 4. Cheap but lackadaisical place to refuel, with an air-con room, specializing in tasty duck on rice; the beer's a bargain too.

Cy'an *Metropolitan Hotel*, 27 Thanon Sathorn Tai Ⓣ02 625 3333. Expensive but highly inventive cooking, fusing Asian and Mediterranean elements to produce strong, clean flavours, with great attention to detail. Charming service to go with it, in a stylish room with the best tables on a terrace overlooking the pool.

Deen 786 Thanon Silom, almost opposite Silom Village. Small, basic, air-con Muslim café (no alcohol), which offers Thai and Chinese standard dishes with a southern Thai twist, as well as spicy Indian-style curries and specialities such as *grupuk* (crispy fish) and *roti kaeng* **(**Muslim pancakes with curry).

Eat Me 1/6 Soi Phiphat 2, Thanon Convent Ⓣ02 238 0931. Highly fashionable art gallery and restaurant in a striking, white, modernist building, with changing exhibitions on the walls and a temptingly relaxing balcony. The pricey, far-reaching menu is more international – tenderloin steak fillet with Dijon sauce, pancetta-wrapped chicken breast with grape salad – than fusion, though the lemon-grass crème brûlée is not to be missed. Daily 3pm–1am.

Harmonique 22 Soi 34, Thanon Charoen Krung, on the lane between Wat Muang Kae express-boat pier and the GPO Ⓣ02 237 8175. A relaxing, welcoming, moderately priced restaurant that's well worth a trip: tables are scattered throughout several converted shophouses, decorated with antiques, and a quiet, leafy courtyard, and the Thai food is varied and excellent – among the seafood specialities, try the crab or red shrimp curries. Closed Sun.

Himali Cha-Cha 1229/11 Soi 47/1, Thanon Charoen Krung, south of GPO Ⓣ02 235 1569 (plus a branch down a short alley off the north end of Thanon Convent, opposite *Irish Xchange*). Fine, moderately priced North Indian restaurant, founded by a character who was chef to numerous Indian ambassadors, and now run by his son. Homely atmosphere, attentive service and a good vegetarian selection.

Indian Hut 311/2–5 Thanon Suriwong, Ⓣ02 237 8812. Bright, white-tablecloth, North Indian restaurant – look out for the *Pizza Hut*-style sign – that's reasonably priced and justly popular with local Indians. For carnivores, tandoori's the thing, with an especially good kastoori chicken kebab with saffron and cumin. There's a huge selection of mostly vegetarian pakoras as appetizers, as well as plenty of veggie main courses and breads, and a hard-to-resist house dahl.

Ishq 142 Thanon Sathorn Nua Ⓣ02 634 5398–9. A beautiful Portuguese colonial-style mansion, with especially opulent bathrooms, set back from the main road and Surasak BTS station amidst fountains. Pricey but very good food from all over Southeast Asia, including tasty Lao mushroom soup and Vietnamese beef balls.

Jim Thompson's Saladaeng Café 120/1 Soi 1, Thanon Saladaeng ☎02 266 9167. A civilized, moderately priced haven with tables in the elegantly informal air-con interior or out in the leafy garden. Thai food stretches to some unusual dishes such as deep-fried morning glory with spicy shrimp and minced pork. There's pasta, salads and other Western dishes, plus a few stabs at fusion including delicious spaghetti *sai ua* (with northern Thai sausage and tomato sauce) and linguini *tom yam kung*. The array of desserts is mouthwatering, rounded off by good coffee and a wide choice of teas.

Khrua Aroy Aroy 3/1 Thanon Pan. In a fruitful area for cheap food (including a night market across Silom on Soi 20), this simple shophouse restaurant stands out for its choice of tasty, well-prepared dishes from all around the kingdom, notably *khao soi*, *kaeng matsaman* and *khanom jiin*. Lunchtimes only.

La Boulange 2–2/1 Thanon Convent. A fine choice for breakfast with great croissants and all sorts of tempting patisserie made on the premises. For savoury lunches and dinners, choose from a variety of quiches, sandwiches, salads and typical brasserie fare such as *gigot d'agneau.*

Le Bouchon 37/17 Patpong 2, near Thanon Suriwong ☎02 234 9109. Cosy, welcoming bar-bistro that's much frequented by the city's French expats, offering French home cooking, such as lamb shank in a white bean sauce (B490); booking is strongly recommended. Closed Sun lunchtime.

Le Café Siam 4 Soi Sri Akson, Thanon Chua Ploeng ☎02 671 0030, ⓦwww.lecafesiam.com. An early-twentieth-century Sino-Thai mansion in a tranquil garden that's difficult to find off the eastern end of Soi Sri Bamphen, but well worth the effort (the restaurant suggests the number of a taxi company – ☎02 611 6499 – or you can download a map from their website). The French and Thai food, with main courses starting at B200, is superb, served in a relaxing ambience that subtly blends Chinese and French styles, with an especially seductive bar area upstairs. Evenings only.

Mali Soi Jusmag, just off Soi Ngam Duphli. Cosy, informal, low-lit restaurant, mostly air-con with a few cramped tables out front. The Thai menu specializes in salads and northeastern food, with plenty of veggie options, while Western options run as far as burgers, potato salad, all-day breakfasts, delicious banana pancakes and a few Mexican dishes. Moderate.

Mei Jiang *Peninsula Hotel*, 333 Thanon Charoennakorn, Klongsan ☎02 861 2888. Probably Bangkok's best Chinese restaurant, with beautiful views of the hotel gardens and the river night and day. It's designed like an elegant teak box, and staff are very attentive and graceful. Specialities include duck smoked with tea and excellent lunchtime *dim sum* – a bargain, starting at B80 a dish.

River View Floor 2, River City Shopping Centre, off Thanon Charoen Krung ☎02 237 0077–8, ext 233. A bit cheesy – waiters with jazzy waistcoats and truly awful muzak – but the views of the river are great and the food's very tasty, including lots of fish dishes, salads and a vegetarian selection; the deep-fried chicken with cashew nuts (B150) and deep-fried pompanos fish with mango salad are recommended.

Somboon Seafood Thanon Suriwong, corner of Thanon Narathiwat Ratchanakharin ☎02 234 4499. Highly favoured seafood restaurant, known for its crab curry (B250) and soy-steamed sea bass, with simple, smart decor and an array of marine life lined up in tanks outside awaiting its gastronomic fate.

Thien Duong *Dusit Thani Hotel*, cnr Silom and Rama IV roads ☎02 236 9999. Probably Bangkok's finest Vietnamese, a classy and expensive restaurant serving beautifully prepared dishes such as succulent *salat cua*, deep-fried soft-shell crab salad with cashew nuts and herb dressing, and zesty *goi ngo sen*, lotus-stem salad with shrimp and pork.

Tongue Thai 18–20 Soi 38, Thanon Charoen Krung ☎02 630 9918–9. In front of the Oriental Place shopping mall. Very high standards of food and cleanliness, with charming, unpretentious service, in a 100-year-old shophouse elegantly decorated with Thai and Chinese antiques and contemporary art. Veggies are very well catered for with delicious dishes such as tofu in black bean sauce and deep-fried banana-flower and corn cakes, while carnivores should try the fantastic beef curry (*panaeng neua*; B170).

Thanon Sukhumvit

See the map on p.121 for locations of the places listed below. In this area, there are also branches of *Aoi* (see opposite), Floor 4, Emporium shopping centre (☎02 664 8590–2), and *Himali Cha-Cha* (see opposite), 2 Soi 35, Thanon Sukhumvit (☎02 258 8846). For those restaurants east of sois 39 and 26 that are not shown on the map, we've given directions from the nearest Skytrain station.

Al Ferdoss Soi 3/1. Long-running Lebanese and Turkish restaurant in the heart of Sukhumvit's Middle Eastern soi, where you can smoke hookah pipes on the streetside terrace and choose from a menu (B70–150) that encompasses shish, hummus, tabouleh and the rest.

Baan Khanitha 36/1 Soi 23 ⓣ02 258 4128. The big attraction at this long-running favourite haunt of Sukhumvit expats is the setting in a traditional Thai house. The food is upmarket Thai and fairly pricey, and includes lots of fiery salads (*yam*), and a good range of *tom yam* soups, green curries and seafood curries.

Bangkok Baking Company Ground Floor, *JW Marriott Hotel*, between sois 2 and 4. Exceptionally delicious cakes, pastries and breads: everything from rosemary focaccia to tiramisu cheesecake (B65–100).

Ban Rie Coffee Opposite Ekamai Eastern Bus Station and beside the Ekamai Skytrain station on the corner of Soi 63. Surely the perfect place to await your next east-coast bus, this chic teakwood pavilion welcomes you via a wooden walkway across a narrow fringe of ricefields and works hard to create a soothing ambience inside. It serves a decent selection of mid-priced hot and iced coffees, as well as Thai desserts, and also offers Internet access and terrace seating.

Basil *Sheraton Grande Hotel*, between sois 12 and 14. Mouthwateringly fine traditional Thai food with a modern twist is the order of the day at this trendy, relatively informal though high-priced restaurant in the super-deluxe five-star *Sheraton*. Recommendations include the grilled river prawns with chilli, the *matsaman* curry (both served with red and green rice) and the surprisingly delicious durian cheesecake. Vegetarian menu on request. Also offers cooking classes (see p.188).

Cabbages and Condoms 6–8 Soi 12, ⓦwww.pda.or.th/restaurant. Run by the Population and Community Development Association of Thailand (PDA; see p.157) – "our food is guaranteed not to cause pregnancy" – so diners are treated to authentic Thai food in the Condom Room, and relaxed scoffing of barbecued seafood in the beer garden. Try the spicy catfish salad (B130) or the prawns steamed in a whole coconut (B250). All proceeds go to the PDA, and there's an adjacent shop selling double-entendre T-shirts, cards, key rings and of course, condoms.

Dosa King Mouth of Soi 19. Informal, all-vegetarian Indian cafe serving good, unpretentious food from both north and south, including twenty different dosa (southern pancake) dishes, tandooris, etc. An alcohol-free zone so you'll have to make do with sweet lassi instead. Most dishes B120–180.

Face Bangkok: La Na Thai and Hazara 29 Soi 38; about 150m walk from BTS Thong Lo Exit 4 ⓣ02 713 6048, ⓦwww.facebars.com. Two restaurants, a bar, a bakery and a spa occupy this attractive compound of traditional, steeply gabled wooden Thai houses. Each restaurant is tastefully styled with appropriate artefacts and fabrics, and the adjacent *Face Bar* makes a chic 'n' funky place for a pre- or post-dinner drink. All venues offer an extensive list of imported wines. The very upmarket *Lan Na Thai* restaurant (daily 11.30am–2.30pm & 6.30–11.30pm) serves quality Thai food, such as Chiang Mai-style pork curry (B390) and deep-fried grouper with tamarind sauce (B460), while the *Hazara* (daily 6.30–11.30pm) specializes in Afghani and north-Indian tandoor cuisine, including murgh Peshwar chicken (B390) and the signature cardamon–marinated lamb (B590).

Gaeng Pa Lerd Rod Soi 33/1; no English sign but it's just before the *Bull's Head*. Hugely popular outdoor restaurant whose tables are clustered under trees in a streetside yard and get packed with office workers at lunchtime. Inexpensive Thai curries (from B40) are the speciality here, with dishes ranging from conventional versions, like catfish and beef curries, to more adventurous offerings like fried cobra with chilli, and curried frog.

Gallery 11 Soi 11. Sharing the traffic-free sub-soi with the idiosyncratic *Suk 11* guest house, this restaurant fosters a similarly laid-back rustic atmosphere, with its wooden building, plentiful foliage and moody lighting. The food is good, authentic, mid-price Thai, with plenty of spicy yam salads, seafood and curries, mostly B100–200. Also serves lots of cocktails and imported wines by the glass (B150).

Le Dalat Indochine 14 Soi 23 ⓣ02 661 7967. There's Indochinese romance aplenty at this delightfully atmospheric restaurant, which is housed in an early-twentieth-century villa decked out in homely style with plenty of photos, pot plants at every turn and eclectic curiosities in the male and female toilets. The extensive, Vietnamese menu features favourites such as a *goi ca* salad of aromatic herbs and shredded pork, *chao tom* shrimp sticks and *ga sa gung*, chicken curry with caramelized ginger. Set dinners from B1000.

Lemongrass 5/1 Soi 24 ⓣ02 258 8637. Known for its delicious Thai nouvelle cuisine (B120–500), including a particularly good minced chicken with ginger, and for its pleasant setting in a converted traditional house. A vegetarian menu is available on request. Advance reservations recommended. Daily 6–11pm.

MahaNaga 2 Soi 29, ⓦwww.mahanaga.com. The dining experience at this tranquil enclave is

Thai cuisine

Thai food is now hugely popular in the West, but nothing, of course, beats coming to Thailand to experience the full range of subtle and fiery flavours, constructed from the freshest ingredients. Four fundamental tastes are identified in Thai cuisine – spiciness, sourness, saltiness and sweetness – and diners aim to share a variety of dishes that impart a balance of these flavours, along with complementary textures. Lemon grass, basil, coriander, galangal, chilli, garlic, lime juice, coconut milk and fermented fish sauce (used instead of salt) are some of the distinctive components that bring these tastes to life. The repertoire of main dishes described below – along with Chinese-style stir-fries such as sweet-and-sour and chicken with cashew nuts – is pretty much standard throughout Thailand, but when you get out into the provinces, you'll have the chance to sample a few local specialities, too.

Curries

Thai curries (*kaeng*) have as their foundation a variety of curry pastes, elaborate and subtle blends of herbs, spices, garlic, shallots and chilli peppers that are traditionally ground together with pestle and mortar. The use of some of these spices, as well as of coconut cream, was imported from India long ago; curries that don't use coconut cream are naturally less sweet and thinner, with the consistency of soups.

While some curries, such as *kaeng karii* (mild and yellow) and *kaeng matsaman* (literally "Muslim curry", with potatoes, peanuts and usually beef), still show their roots, others have been adapted into quintessentially Thai dishes, notably *kaeng khiaw wan* (sweet and green), *kaeng phet* (red and hot) and *kaeng phanaeng* (thick and savoury, with peanuts). *Kaeng som* generally contains vegetables and fish and takes its distinctive sourness from the addition of tamarind or, in the northeast, okra leaves. Traditionally eaten during the cool season, *kaeng liang* uses up gourds or other bland vegetables, but is made aromatic by the heat of peppercorns and shallots and the fragrance of basil leaves.

Preparing *som tam* at a street stall

Soups

Thai soups, an essential component of most shared meals, are eaten simultaneously with other dishes, not as a starter. They are often flavoured with the distinctive tang of lemon grass, kaffir lime leaves and galangal, and garnished with fresh coriander, and can be extremely hot if the cook adds liberal handfuls of chillies to the pot. Two favourites are *tom kha kai*, a creamy coconut chicken soup; and *tom yam kung*, a hot and sour prawn soup without coconut milk. *Khao tom*, a starchy rice soup that's generally eaten for breakfast, meets the approval of few Westerners, except as a traditional hangover cure.

Kaeng som

Salads

One of the lesser-known delights of Thai cuisine is the *yam* or salad, which can often impart all four of the fundamental flavours in an unusual and refreshing harmony. *Yam* can be made in many permutations – with noodles, meat, seafood or vegetables, for example – but at the heart of every variety is a liberal squirt of fresh lime juice and a fiery sprinkling of chopped chillies. As well as *som tam, laap* and *nam tok* described in the box on regional cuisine, salads to look out for include *yam som oh* (pomelo), *yam hua plee* (banana flowers) and *yam plaa duk foo* (crispy fried catfish).

Noodle and rice dishes

Thais eat noodles when Westerners would dig into a sandwich – for lunch, as a late-night snack or just to pass the time. Sold on street stalls everywhere, they come in assorted varieties – including *kway tiaw* (made with rice flour) and *ba mii* (egg noodles), *sen yai* (wide) and *sen lek* (thin) – and get boiled up as soups (*nam*), doused in gravy (*rat na*) or stir-fried (*haeng*, "dry", or *phat*, "fried"). Most famous of noodle dishes is *kway tiaw phat thai* (usually abbreviated to *phat thai*, meaning "Thai fry-up"), a delicious combination of fried noodles, beansprouts, egg, tofu and spring onions, sprinkled with ground peanuts and the juice of half a lime, and often spiked with tiny dried shrimps.

Fried rice (*khao pat*) is the other faithful standby that's guaranteed to feature on menus right across the country. Also popular are cheap, one-dish meals served on a bed of steamed rice, notably *khao kaeng* (with curry), *khao na pet* (with roast duck) and *khao muu daeng* (with red-roasted pork).

น้ำปลาแท้
ตรา
ทิพรส
味露

Bottles of fish sauce

Desserts

Desserts (*khanom*) don't really figure on most restaurant menus, but a few places offer bowls of *luk taan cheum*, a jellied concoction of lotus or palm seeds floating in a syrup scented with jasmine or other aromatic flowers. Coconut milk is a feature of most other desserts, notably delicious coconut ice cream, *khao niaw mamuang* (sticky rice with mango), and a royal Thai cuisine special of coconut custard (*sangkhayaa*) cooked inside a small pumpkin, whose flesh you can also eat.

Thai desserts

Southern Thai food

Southern Thai cuisine displays a marked Malaysian and Muslim aspect as you near the border and, as you'd expect in a region bounded by sea, the salty flavours associated with seafood are prevalent. Liberal use of **turmeric** is another distinctive feature, which gives many southern dishes a yellow hue, notably *plaa khluk khamin*, grilled fish rubbed with turmeric, garlic and salt. A huge variety of **curries** are dished up in the south, many of them substituting shrimp paste for the fish sauce used elsewhere in Thailand. Three curries that are now found nationally seem to have taken root in Thailand on the peninsula: the rich and usually fairly mild Muslim curry, *kaeng matsaman*; *kaeng phanaeng* (a corruption of Penang, an island off the west coast of Malaysia), a thick, savoury curry also usually made with beef; and the Indian-style chicken curry served over lightly spiced saffron rice, known as *kaeng karii kai*. Other curries are rather more distinctive: *kaeng leuang* ("yellow curry") features fish, turmeric, pineapple, squash, beans and green papaya, while *kaeng tai plaa* is a powerful combination of fish stomach with potatoes, beans, pickled bamboo shoots and turmeric.

Satays feature more down here, as does delicious *hor mok* (sometimes known as *khai plaa mok*), a kind of seafood soufflé made with coconut milk and red curry paste. In Muslim areas, you'll come across *khao mok kai*, the local version of a biryani: chicken and rice cooked with turmeric, cinnamon, cloves and other Indian spices and served with clear chicken soup. Also popular, especially in Phuket, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Trang, is *khanom jiin* (literally, "Chinese pastry"), rice noodles topped with hot, sweet or fishy sauce (the latter Malay-style *naam yaa*, made with ground fish) and served with crispy raw vegetables.

Markets in the south often serve *khao yam* for breakfast or lunch, a deliciously refreshing salad of dried cooked rice, dried shrimp, grated coconut and lemon grass served with a sweet sauce. You'll find many types of **roti** in the south, too – pancake-like bread sold hot from pushcart griddles and, in its plain form, rolled with sickly sweet condensed milk and sugar. Other versions include *roti kluay* (with banana), *roti khai* (with egg), *savoury mataba* (with minced chicken or beef) and, served with curry sauce for breakfast, *roti kaeng*.

best appreciated after dark, when the fountain-courtyard tables are romantically lit and the air-con interior seduces with its burgundy velvet drapes. Cuisine is fusion fine-dining, though some east-west combos work better than others and the vegetarian selection is underwhelming. Grilled salmon in red curry is a winner (B350), or you might brave the rack of lamb served with spicy vegetables, egg noodles and mango sauce (B450).

Nipa 3rd Floor, Landmark Plaza, between sois 4 and 6. Tasteful traditional Thai-style place, run by the adjacent hotel, *The Landmark Bangkok*, whose classy menu features an adventurous range of dishes, including spicy fish curry (B180), several *matsaman* and green curries (B220), excellent *som tam* and mouthwatering braised spare ribs. Also offers a sizeable vegetarian selection. Regular cookery classes are held here – see "Listings" on p.188 for details.

Pizza Venezia Soi 11 ⓦwww.veneziabangkok.com. Fairly formal Italian place that's a favourite with Sukhumvit expats for its pizzas (B180–360). Also offers a diverse roster of daily specials, plus classic pasta, meat and fish dishes, including a good oven-baked sea bass in white-wine sauce (B590).

Suda Restaurant Soi 14. Unpretentious shop-house restaurant whose formica tables and plastic chairs spill out onto the soi and are mainly patronized by budget-conscious expats and their Thai friends. The friendly proprietor serves a good, long menu of Thai favourites (from B40), including deep-fried chicken in banana leaves, battered shrimps, fried tuna with cashews and chilli, and sticky rice with mango.

Tamarind Café 300m down Soi 20 ⓦwww.tamarind-cafe.com. This stylish vegetarian cafe and photo gallery serves an eclectic menu that fuses flavours from Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Japan and the Mediterranean in a refreshingly innovative menu. Wild mushroom steak (B280), Malaysian-style quesadilla (B95) and triple-bean salad (B110) all feature, as does all-day brunch. There are changing photo exhibitions, lounge-style seating, free wi-fi Internet access, and a roof terrace. Mon–Fri 11am–11pm, Sat & Sun 9am–11pm.

Took Lae Dee Inside the Foodland supermarket on Soi 5. The place to come for very cheap breakfasts: hearty American breakfasts eaten at the counter cost just B55.

Vientiane Kitchen (Khrua Vientiane) 8 Soi 36, about 50m south off Thanon Sukhumvit. Just a 3min walk west then south from Thong Lo Skytrain station (Exit 2) and you're transported into a little piece of Isaan, where the menu's stocked full of northeastern delicacies, a live band sets the mood with heartfelt folk songs, and there are even occasional performances by a troupe of upcountry dancers. The Lao- and Isaan-accented menu (B120–250) includes vegetable curry with ants' eggs, spicy-fried frog, jackfruit curry, and farm chicken with cashews, plus there's a decent range of veggie options such as meat-free *larb* and sweet and sour dishes. With its airy, barn-like interior and a mixed clientele of Thais and expats, it all adds up to a very enjoyable dining experience.

Yong Lee Corner of Soi 15. One of the few refreshingly basic – and brusque – rice-and-noodle shops on Sukhumvit; dishes cost from just B40. Daily 11.30am–2.30pm & 5.30–9.30pm.

Nightlife and entertainment

For many of Bangkok's male visitors, nightfall in the city is the signal to hit the sex bars, most notoriously in the area off Thanon Silom known as Patpong (see p.155). Fortunately, Bangkok's **nightlife** has thoroughly grown up and left these neon sumps behind in the last ten years, offering everything from microbreweries and vertiginous, roof-top cocktail bars to fiercely chic clubs and dance bars, hosting top-class DJs: within spitting distance of the beer bellies flopped onto Patpong's bars, for example, lies Soi 4, Thanon Silom, one of the city's most happening after-dark haunts. Along with Silom 4, the high-concept clubs and bars of Sukhumvit and the lively, teeming venues of Banglamphu pull in the style-conscious cream of Thai youth and are tempting an increasing number of travellers to stuff their party gear into their rucksacks. Though Silom 4 started out as a purely **gay** area, it now offers a range of styles in gay, mixed and straight pubs, DJ bars and clubs, while the city's other main gay area is the more exclusive Silom 2 (towards Thanon Rama IV). As with the straight scene, many gay bars feature go-go dancers and live sex shows. Those listed here do not. Most bars and clubs operate nightly until 1am, while clubs on Silom 4 and Silom 2 can stay open until 2am, with closing time strictly enforced under the current government's Social Order Policy. This has also involved occasional clampdowns on illegal drugs, including urine testing of bar customers, and more widespread ID checks to curb under-age drinking (you have to be 21 or over to drink in bars and clubs) – it's worth bringing your passport out with you, as ID is often requested however old you are.

On the cultural front, the most accessible of the capital's performing arts are **Thai dancing**, particularly when served up in bite-size portions in tourist shows, and the graceful and humorous performances at the **Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre** on Thanon Rama IV. **Thai boxing** is also well worth watching: the live experience at either of Bangkok's two main national stadia far outshines the TV coverage.

Bars and clubs

For convenient drinking and dancing, we've split the most recommended of the city's bars and clubs into three central areas. The travellers' enclave of **Banglamphu** takes on a new personality after dark, when its hub, Thanon Khao San, becomes a "walking street", closed to all traffic but open to almost any kind of makeshift stall, selling everything from fried bananas and cheap beer to bargain fashions and idiosyncratic art works. Young Thais crowd the area to browse and snack before piling in to Banglamphu's countless bars and clubs, most of which host a good mix of local and foreign drinkers and ravers. Venues here tend to be low-key, with free entry (though some places ask you to show ID first), reasonably priced drinks and up-to-date sounds, or there's always plenty of kerbside restaurant tables, which make great places to nurse a few beers and watch the parade. Away from Khao San and nearby Soi Ram Bhuttri, Thanon Phra Athit is famous for its style-conscious little restaurant-bars where tables spill over onto the pavement, and the live music is likely to be a lone piano-player or guitarist.

Downtown bars, which tend to attract both foreign and Thai drinkers, are concentrated on adjoining Soi Lang Suan and Soi Sarasin (between Thanon Ploenchit and Lumphini Park), and in studenty Siam Square, as well as around the east end of Thanon Silom. Lang Suan and Sarasin boast several live-music bars, while the western end of the latter (between the jazz bar, *Brown Sugar*, and Thanon Rajdamri) supports a gaggle of good-time, gay and straight, DJ bars that are very popular with young Thais at weekends. On Silom 4, while most of the gay venues have been around for some years now, other bars and clubs have opened and closed with bewildering speed. All the same – once you've passed through the ID check at the entrance – on a short, slow bar-crawl around this wide, traffic-free alley lined with pavement tables, it would be hard not to find somewhere to enjoy yourself. If, among all the choice of nightlife around Silom, you do end up in one of Patpong's sex shows, watch out for hyper-inflated bar bills and other cons – plenty of customers get ripped off in some way, and stories of menacing bouncers are legion. Thanon Sukhumvit also has its share of girlie bars and bar-beers (open-sided drinking halls with huge circular bars) packed full of hostesses, but it's also garnering quite a reputation for high-concept "destination bars" (where the decor is as important as the drinks menu), as well as being the home of several long-established British-style pubs.

During the cool season (Nov–Feb), an evening out at one of the seasonal **beer gardens** is a pleasant way of soaking up the urban atmosphere (and the traffic fumes). You'll find them in hotel forecourts or sprawled in front of dozens of shopping centres all over the city.

Banglamphu and Ratanakosin

Except where indicated, all bars listed below are marked on the map on pp.108–09

Ad Here the 13th 13 Thanon Samsen. Friendly, intimate little jazz bar where half a dozen tables of Thai and expat musos congregate to listen to nightly sets from the in-house blues 'n' jazz quartet (about 10pm onwards). Well-priced beer and plenty of cocktails. Nightly 6pm–midnight.

Bangkok Bar Next to *Sawasdee Inn* at 149 Soi Ram Bhuttri. This skinny two-storey dance bar is fronted by a different DJ every night; the pop and house beats draw capacity crowds nightly. Nightly 6pm–1am.

Bar Bali 58 Thanon Phra Athit. Typical Phra Athit bar-restaurant, with just a half-dozen tables, a small menu of salads and drinking foods and a decent selection of well-priced cocktails. Nightly 6pm–1am.

Café Democ 78 Thanon Rajdamnoen Klang. Fashionable, dark and dinky bar that overlooks Democracy Monument and is spread over one and a half cosy floors, with extra seating on the semicircular mezzanine. Lots of cocktails, nightly sessions from up-and-coming Thai DJs, and regular hip-hop evenings. Tues–Sun 4pm–2am.

The Cave Thanon Khao San. Feel like climbing the walls after your tenth bottle of Singha? This bar comes complete with indoor climbing wall, charging B100 per climb or B200/hour. Also sells climbing shoes and gear. Nightly 5pm–midnight.

Cinnamon Bar 106 Thanon Ram Bhuttri. Drink at little tables on the narrow outside terrace, beneath the waterfall wall and plastic bamboo trees, or join the fashionable, well-behaved student crowd around the pool table inside. Nightly 6pm–1am.

The Club Thanon Khao San. The kitsch, pseudo-Italianate interior – designed to evoke a classical courtyard garden, complete with central fountain and statue of a chubby child hugging a fish – is unlikely to appeal to many Western clubbers, but Thais love this place, putting up with the ID checks at the door and making the most of the two bars and resident DJs. Also serves food. Daily 11am–1am.

Comme Thanon Phra Athit. Live music from enthusiastic cover bands, easy chairs and an open frontage mean that this inviting bar-restaurant, one of the largest on Phra Athit, nearly always gets a good crowd. Also serves some food (mostly Thai standards). 6pm–1am.

Deep 329/1-2 Thanon Ram Bhuttri. Get here early if you want a table on a Friday or Saturday night as the bands draw eager crowds that pack out the tiny bar. 6pm–1am.

Gullivers Travellers' Tavern Thanon Khao San, Ⓦ www.gulliverbangkok.com. Infamous, long-established backpacker-oriented air-con pub with pool tables, sports TV and reasonably priced beer (happy hours 3–9pm). Also does international food and has another branch on Thanon Sukhumvit. Daily 11am–1am.

Lava Club Basement, Bayon Building, 209 Thanon Khao San. Self-consciously sophisticated basement lounge bar done out in "volcanic" red and black with laser displays to enhance the look. DJs play mainly house and rave. Nightly 8pm–1am; ID sometimes required.

Molly Pub Thanon Ram Bhuttri. The attractive, colonial-style facade, complete with pastel-coloured shutters, make a pleasant backdrop for the outdoor tables and low-slung wooden chairs that are perfectly located for people-watching over a Beer Chang or two. Also serves food. Daily 11am–1am.

Po 230 Tha Thien, Thanon Maharat (see map on p.124). When the Chao Phraya express boats start to wind down around 6pm, this bar takes over the rustic wooden pier and the balcony above with their great sunset views across the river. Beer and Thai whisky with accompanying Thai food and loud Thai and Western pop music – very popular with local students.

Sabai Bar Mouth of Sunset Street, 197 Thanon Khao San. Open-sided, three-storey, streetside bar that's the perfect spot for watching the Khao San parade. Nightly 6pm–1am.

Silk Bar 129–131 Thanon Khao San. The tiered outdoor decks are a popular spot for sipping cocktails while watching the nightly Khao San hustle; inside there's air-con, a pool table, a DJ and a small menu of standard Thai fare. Daily 6am–1am.

Susie Pub Next to *Marco Polo Guest House* on the soi between Thanon Khao San and Thanon Ram Bhuttri. Big, dark, phenomenally popular pub that's usually standing room only after 9pm. Has a pool table, decent music, resident DJs and cheapish beer. Packed with young Thais. Daily 11am–1am; ID sometimes required.

Siam Square, Thanon Ploenchit and northern downtown

The venues listed below are marked on the map on p.157.

Ad Makers 51/51 Soi Langsuan ☎ 02 652 0168. Friendly, spacious bar with Wild West-style wooden decor and good food, attracting a cross-section of Thais and foreigners, and featuring nightly folk and rock bands.

Brown Sugar 231/19–20 Soi Sarasin ⓣ02 250 1826. Chic, pricey, lively bar, acknowledged as the capital's top jazz venue.

Concept CM2 *Novotel*, Soi 6, Siam Square ⓣ02 209 8888. More theme park than nightclub, with live bands and various, barely distinct entertainment zones, including karaoke, an Italian restaurant and everything from bhangra to hip-hop in the Boom Room. Admission B550 (including two drinks) Fri & Sat, B220 (including one drink) Sun–Thurs.

Dallas Pub Soi 6, Siam Square ⓣ02 255 3276. Typical dark, noisy "songs for life" hangout – buffalo skulls, Indian heads, American flags – but a lot of fun: singalongs to decent live bands, dancing round the tables, cheap beer and friendly, casual staff.

WOC 264/4–6 Soi 3, Siam Square. Smart, modernist but easy-going hangout for students and 20-somethings, with reasonably priced drinks, a good choice of accompanying snacks and some interesting Thai/Italian pastas for main dishes. A little hard to find up some stairs by Siam Square's Centerpoint.

Hard Rock Café Soi 11, Siam Square. Genuine outlet of the famous chain, better for drink than food. Brash enthusiasm and big sounds, with predictable live bands nightly.

Saxophone 3/8 Victory Monument (southeast corner), Thanon Phrayathai ⓣ02 246 5472. Lively, spacious venue that hosts nightly jazz, blues, folk and rock bands and attracts a good mix of Thais and farangs; decent food, relaxed drinking atmosphere and, all things considered, reasonable prices.

Syn Bar *Swissôtel Nai Lert Park*, 2 Thanon Witthayu. Hip hotel bar, popular at weekends, decorated retro style with bubble chairs and sparkling fibre-optic carpet. Excellent cocktails and nightly DJs playing house and Latin; happy hour Mon–Fri 5–9pm.

Southern downtown: south of Thanon Rama IV

See the map on p.117 for locations of the venues listed below.

The Barbican 9/4–5 Soi Thaniya, east end of Thanon Silom ⓣ02 234 3590. Stylishly modern fortress-like decor to match the name: dark woods, metal and undressed stone. With Guinness on tap and the financial pages posted above the urinals, it could almost be a smart City of London pub – until you look out of the windows onto the soi's incongruous Japanese hostess bars. Good food, DJ sessions and happy hours Mon–Fri 5–7pm.

Hu'u Ascott Building, 187 Thanon Sathorn Tai. Moody, elegant and dimly lit bar in Asian minimalist style, playing hot or cool sounds according to the time of night and serving excellent cocktails, alongside snacks and tapas; be prepared for a stylish surprise at the toilet washbasins.

Irish Xchange 1/5 Thanon Convent, off the east end of Thanon Silom ⓣ02 266 7160. Blarney Bangkok-style: a warm, relaxing Irish pub, tastefully done out in dark wood and familiar knick-knacks and packed with expats, especially on Fri night. Guinness and Kilkenny Bitter on tap, expensive food such as Irish stew and beef and Guinness pie, and a rota of house bands.

Lucifer 76/1–3 Patpong 1. Popular dance club in the dark heart of Patpong, largely untouched by the sleaze around it. Done out with mosaics and stalactites like a satanic grotto, with balconies to look down on the dance-floor action. Free entry, except Fri & Sat, B150 including one drink. *Radio City*, the interconnected bar downstairs, is only slightly less raucous, with jumping live bands, including famous Elvis and Tom Jones impersonators, and tables out on the sweaty pavement.

Noriega's Soi 4, Thanon Silom. Unpretentious, good-time bar at the end of the alley, with nightly live bands playing jazz, blues and rock; salsa lessons followed by big Latin sounds on Sun evenings.

The Sky Bar & Distil Floor 63, State Tower, 1055 Thanon Silom, cnr of Thanon Charoen Krung ⓣ02 624 9555. Thrill-seekers and view addicts shouldn't miss forking out for an alfresco drink here, 275 metres above the city's pavements – come around 6pm to enjoy the stunning panoramas in both the light and the dark. It's standing only at *The Sky Bar*, a circular restaurant bar on the edge of the building with almost 360° views, but for the sunset itself, you're better off on the outside terrace of *Distil* on the other side of the building (where bookings are accepted), which has a wider choice of drinks, charming service and huge couches to recline on.

Speed Soi 4, Thanon Silom. Dance bar with an industrial feel in black and silver, popular at the weekend, playing hip-hop and R'n'B. Fri & Sat B100, including one drink.

Tapas Bar Soi 4, Thanon Silom ⓦwww.tapasroom.com. Vaguely Spanish-oriented, pricey bar (but no tapas) with Moorish-style decor, whose outside tables are probably the best spot for

△ The Sky Bar

checking out the comings and goings on the soi; inside, music ranges from house and hip-hop to Latin jazz and funk, often with an accompanying percussionist (Fri & Sat admission B100).

Tawandaeng German Brewery 462/61 Thanon Rama III ⓣ02 678 1114–5. A taxi-ride south of Thanon Sathorn down Thanon Narathiwat Ratchanakharin – and best to book a table in advance – this vast all-rounder is well worth the effort. Under a huge dome, up to 1600 revellers enjoy good food and great micro-brewed beer every night, but the main attraction is the mercurial cabaret (not Sun), featuring Fong Naam, led by Bruce Gaston, who blend Thai classical and popular with Western styles of music.

Thanon Sukhumvit

The places listed below are marked on the map on p.121. Note that many clubs in Sukhumvit require you to show ID when you enter.

The Ball in Hand First floor of the *Sin* building, behind 7/11 on Soi 4, ⓦwww.theballinhand.com. In notoriously sleazy Soi 4, better known as Soi Nana, this vast pool hall and bar stands out from all the other places with pool tables because of its dozen or so high-quality imported tables, its strict no-hustle policy and its regular competitions. Daily about 1pm–1am.

Bed Supperclub 26 Soi 11 ⓣ02 651 3537, ⓦwww.bedsupperclub.com. Worth visiting for the futuristic visuals alone, this seductively curvaceous space-pod bar squats self-consciously in an otherwise quite ordinary soi. Inside, the all-white interior is dimly lit and surprisingly cosy, with deep couches inviting drinkers to recline around the edges of the upstairs gallery, getting a good view of the downstairs bar and DJ. The vibe is always welcoming and a lot less pretentious than you might expect; some nights are themed, including a weekly gay night (check listings mags or website for details), when a B500 cover charge is redeemable against two drinks of the equivalent price. The restaurant section is starker, lit with glacial ultra-violet, and serving a Pacific Rim fusion menu 7.30–9pm (reservations essential). Bar opens nightly 8pm–2am; ID required.

The Bull's Head Soi 33/1. A Sukhumvit institution that takes pride in being Bangkok's most authentic British pub, right down to the horse brasses, jukebox and typical pub food. Famous for its Sunday evening "toss the boss" happy hours (5–7pm), when a flip of a coin determines whether or not you have to pay for your round. Daily 11am–1.30am.

Cheap Charlie's Soi 11. Idiosyncratic, long-running pavement bar that's famous for its cheap beer and lack of tables and chairs. A few lucky punters get to occupy the bar-stools but otherwise it's standing room only. Daily 3pm–2am.

Gullivers Traveler's Tavern 6 Soi 5, ⓦwww.gulliverbangkok.com. An offshoot of the original Khao San sports bar, this cavernous branch has tables inside and out at which it serves draught Guinness and the rest (happy hour lasts from midday–9pm), as well as an international menu. Shows live sporting fixtures on TV and has table football, pool tables and Internet access. Daily 11am–1am.

Londoner Brew Pub Mouth of Soi 33, ⓦwww.the-londoner.com. Aside from the pool table, darts board, big-screen sports TV and live music (nightly from about 9pm), it's the specially brewed pints of Londoner's Pride Cream Bitter and London Pilsner 33 that draw in the punters. Happy hours 4–7pm & 11pm–1am. Also has free wi-fi Internet access. Daily 11am–1am.

Q Bar 34 Soi 11, ⓦwww.qbarbangkok.com. Very dark, very trendy, New York-style bar occupying two floors and a terrace. Famous for its wide choice of chilled vodkas, and for its music, *Q Bar* appeals to a mixed crowd of fashionable people, particularly on Friday and Saturday nights when the DJs fill the dance floor. Arrive before 11pm if you want a seat, and don't turn up in shorts, singlets or sandals if you're male. Mon–Thurs B400 incl. 2 free drinks, Fri–Sun B600. Daily 8pm–1am; ID required.

Robin Hood Mouth of Soi 33/1. Another popular British pub, with pool table, sports TV and English food, plus an all-day breakfast for B280. Daily 11am–1am.

Gay scene

The bars, clubs and bar-restaurants listed here are the most notable of Bangkok's gay nightlife venues; *Bed Supperclub* (see p.173) also hosts a regular gay night. For more general background on gay life in Thailand, contacts and sources of information, most of them concentrated in Bangkok, see p.71. Don't forget **Bangkok Pride** (ⓦwww.bangkokpride.org) in mid-November, when the capital's gay community struts its stuff in a week of parades, cabarets, fancy-dress shows and sports contests.

The Balcony Soi 4, Thanon Silom. Unpretentious, fun place with a large, popular terrace, reasonably priced drinks, karaoke and decent Thai and Western food.

Dick's Café Duangthawee Plaza, 894/7–8 Soi Pratuchai, Thanon Suriwong. Stylish day-and-night café-restaurant (daily 10.30am–2am), hung with exhibitions by gay artists, on a traffic-free soi opposite the prominent Wall St Tower, ideal for drinking, eating decent Thai and Western food or just chilling out.

Disgo Disgo Soi 2, Thanon Silom. Small, well-designed bar-disco with a retro feel, playing good dance music to a fun young crowd.

DJ Station Soi 2, Thanon Silom. Highly fashionable but unpretentious disco, packed at weekends, attracting a mix of Thais and farangs; cabaret show nightly at 11.30pm. B100 including one drink (B200 including two drinks Fri & Sat).

Expresso Soi 2, Thanon Silom. Immaculately designed bar-lounge with cool water features and subtle lighting.

Freeman Dance Arena, 60/18–21 Soi 2/1, Thanon Silom (in a small soi between Soi Thaniya and Soi 2). Busy disco, somewhat more Thai-oriented than *DJ Station*, with slick cabaret shows at 11.30pm and 1am. B150 including one drink (B250 including two drinks Fri & Sat). Under the same management is *Richard's*, a smart, pre-club bar-restaurant next door.

JJ Park 8/3 Soi 2, Thanon Silom. Classy, Thai-oriented bar-restaurant, for relaxed socializing rather than raving, with nightly singers, comedy shows and good food.

Sphinx 98–104 Soi 4, Thanon Silom. Chic decor, terrace seating and very good Thai and Western food attract a sophisticated crowd to this ground-floor bar and restaurant; karaoke and live music upstairs at *Pharoah's*.

Telephone Pub 114/11–13 Soi 4, Thanon Silom. Cruisey, dimly lit, long-standing eating and drinking venue with a terrace on the alley and telephones on the tables inside.

Vega Soi 39, Thanon Sukhumvit. Trendy bar-restaurant run by a group of lesbians. The live music, karaoke and dance floor attract a mixed, fashionable crowd. Mon–Sat 11am–1am.

Culture shows and performing arts

Because of the language barrier, most Thai theatre is inaccessible to tourists and so, with a few exceptions, the best way to experience the traditional **performing arts**

Bangkok for kids

The following theme parks and amusement centres are all designed for kids, the main drawback being that many are located a long way from the city centre. Other attractions kids should enjoy include the Siam Ocean World aquarium (see p.153), Dusit Zoo (see p.148), cycling around Muang Boran Ancient City (see p.160), and the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre at Suan Lum Night Bazaar (see p.176). For general tips on kids' Thailand, see p.72.

Children's Discovery Museum Opposite Chatuchak Weekend Market on Thanon Kamphaeng Phet 4 (Tues–Fri 9am–5pm, Sat & Sun 10am–6pm; B150, kids B120; ⓣ02 615 7333, ⓦwww.bkkchildrenmuseum.com/english). Interactive and hands-on displays covering science, the environment, human and animal life. Mo Chit Skytrain or Chatuchak Park subway or, from Banglamphu, any bus bound for Chatuchak or the Northern Bus Terminal (see p.159).

Dream World Ten minutes' drive north of Don Muang Airport at kilometre-stone 7 Thanon Rangsit-Ongharak (Mon–Fri 10am–5pm, Sat & Sun 10am–7pm; B120, children B95; ⓣ02 533 1152, ⓦwww.dreamworld-th.com). Theme park with different areas such as Fantasy Land, Dream Garden and Adventure Land. Water rides, a hanging coaster and other amusements. Non-air-con buses #39 and #59 from Rajdamnoen Klang in Banglamphu to Rangsit, then songthaew or tuk-tuk to Dream World; or bus, Skytrain or subway to Mo Chit/Chatuchak Park, then air-con bus #523.

Safari World On the northeastern outskirts at 99 Thanon Ramindra, Minburi (daily 9am–4.30pm; B700, children B450; ⓣ02 518 1000, ⓦwww.safariworld.com). Drive-through safari park, complete with monkeys, lions, rhinos, giraffes and zebras, plus a sea-life area with dolphins and sea lions. If you don't have your own car, you can be driven through the park in a Safari World coach. Take air-con bus #60 from Rajdamnoen Klang in Banglamphu or air-con #26 from Victory Monument, then a songthaew to Safari World.

Siam Park On the far eastern edge of town at 101 Thanon Sukhapiban 2 (daily 10am–6pm; B400, children B300; ⓣ02 919 7200, ⓦwww.siamparkcity.com). Waterslides, whirlpools and artificial surf, plus rollercoasters, a small zoo and a botanical garden. Air-con bus #60 from Rajdamnoen Klang in Banglamphu or air-con #501 from Hualamphong Station.

is usually at shows designed for tourists. You can, however, witness Thai dancing being performed for its original ritual purpose, usually several times a day, at the Lak Muang Shrine behind the Grand Palace (see p.125) and the Erawan Shrine on the corner of Thanon Ploenchit (see p.153). For background on Thai classical dance and traditional theatre, see p.60.

The easiest place to get a glimpse of the variety and spectacle intrinsic to traditional Thai theatre is at the unashamedly tourist-oriented **Siam Niramit cultural extravaganza** (nightly from 6pm, show starts at 8pm; B1500; ⓣ02 649 9222, ⓦwww.siamniramit.com; tickets can be bought on the spot or through most travel agents). The eighty-minute show presents a history of regional Thailand's culture and beliefs in a hi-tech spectacular of fantastic costumes and huge chorus numbers, enlivened by acrobatics and flashy special effects. It's staged in the 2000-seat Ratchada theatre at 19 Thanon Tiam Ruammit, a five-minute walk from the Thailand Culture Centre subway, following signs for the South Korean embassy; the theatre complex also includes crafts outlets and a buffet restaurant (dinner costs B500). The far more sedate **National Theatre,** next to the National Museum on the northwest corner of Sanam Luang (ⓣ02 224 1342 or 02 222 1012) stages roughly weekly shows of music, *lakhon* (classical dance-drama) and *likay* (folk drama) – a programme in English is posted up in the theatre foyer, or contact the nearby Bangkok Information Centre (see p.97),

△ The Traditional Thai Puppet Theartre

who keep a copy of the programme in Thai – and there are outdoor shows of classical music and dancing at the National Museum in the dry season (Dec–April Sat & Sun 5pm; B20).

The **Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre** (Ⓣ02 252 9683–4, Ⓦwww.thaipuppet.com), at Suan Lum Night Bazaar on Thanon Rama IV, stages entertaining tourist-oriented performances, which, though pricey, are well worth it for both adults and children. The puppets in question are jointed stick-puppets (*hun lakhon lek*), an art form that was developed in the early twentieth century and had all but died out before the owner of the theatre, Sakorn Yangkeowsod (aka Joe Louis), came to its rescue in the 1980s. Each sixty-centimetre-tall puppet is manipulated by three puppeteers, who are accomplished Thai classical dancers in their own right, complementing their charges' elegant and precise gestures with graceful movements in a harmonious ensemble. Hour-long shows (B900, kids B300) are put on daily at the theatre at 7.30pm, preceded by a video documentary in English at 7pm. The puppets perform mostly stories from the *Ramakien*, accompanied by surtitles or synopses in English and live traditional music of a high standard.

Many tourist restaurants offer low-tech versions of the Siam Niramit experience, in the form of nightly **culture shows** – usually a hotchpotch of Thai dancing and classical music, with a martial-arts demonstration thrown in; it's always worth calling ahead to reserve, especially if you want a vegetarian version of the set menu. Worth checking out are the upmarket, riverside *Supatra River House* at 266 Soi Wat Rakhang in Thonburi (Ⓣ02 411 0305), where twice a week diners are entertained by performers from the nearby Patravadi Theatre (Fri & Sat at 8.30pm; B650–850 including food); and Silom Village (Ⓣ02 234 4581) on Thanon Silom, which stages a nightly fifty-minute indoor show (8.30pm; B600) to accompany a set menu of Thai food (available from 7pm), as well as a rather desultory free show at 7.45pm at its outdoor restaurant.

More glitzy and occasionally ribald entertainment is the order of the day at the capital's two **ladyboy cabaret shows**, where a bevy of luscious transvestites don glamorous outfits and perform over-the-top song and dance routines: Mambo Cabaret plays at the theatre in Washington Square, between Sukhumvit sois 22 and 24 (Ⓣ02 259 5715; nightly 8pm; Nov–Feb also at 10pm; B600–800), and New Calypso Cabaret performs inside the *Asia Hotel*, close by Ratchathewi Skytrain station at 296 Thanon Phayathai (Ⓣ02 216 8937, Ⓦwww.calypsocabaret.com; nightly 8.15 & 9.45pm; B1000 or half-price if booked online 5 days ahead).

Thai boxing

The violence of the average **Thai boxing** match may be offputting to some, but spending a couple of hours at one of Bangkok's two main stadiums can be immensely entertaining, not least for the enthusiasm of the spectators and the ritualistic aspects of the fights. Bouts, advertised in the English-language newspapers, are held in the capital every night of the week at the **Rajdamnoen Stadium**, next to the TAT office on Rajdamnoen Nok (Ⓣ02 281 4205; Mon, Wed, Sun 6pm, Thurs 5pm), and at **Lumphini Stadium** on Thanon Rama IV (Ⓣ02 252 8765; Tues & Fri 6.30pm, Sat 2pm & 6.30pm). Tickets cost B1000–2000 (at Rajdamnoen the view from the B1000 seats is partially obscured). Sessions usually feature ten bouts, each consisting of five three-minute rounds (with two-minute rests in between each round), so if you're not a big fan it may be worth turning up an hour late, as the better fights tend to happen later in the billing. It's more fun if you buy one of the less expensive standing tickets, enabling you to witness the frantic gesticulations of the betting aficionados at close range. For more on Thai boxing and on training camps outside the city, see p.61.

To engage in a little *muay thai* yourself, visit Sor Vorapin's Gym at 13 Trok Kasap off Thanon Chakrabongse in Banglamphu, which holds *muay thai* **classes** twice daily (B400/session, B2500/7 sessions; Ⓣ02 282 3551, Ⓦwww.thaiboxings.com). Jitti's Gym on Soi Amon off Sukhumvit Soi 49 also offers well-regarded training sessions for foreigners (Ⓣ02 2392 5890, Ⓦwww.thailandroad.com/jittigym). For more in-depth training and further information about Thai boxing, contact the Muay Thai Institute on the far northern outskirts of Bangkok (Ⓣ02 992 0096, Ⓦwww.muaythai-institute.net), which runs training courses for foreigners (B6400 for 40hr), including practical instruction, as well as history and theory.

Shopping

Bangkok has a good reputation for shopping, particularly for silk, gems and fashions, where the range and quality are streets ahead of other Thai cities, and antiques and handicrafts are good buys too. As always, watch out for **fakes**: cut glass masquerading as precious stones (see p.182 for advice on this), old, damaged goods being passed off as antiques, and counterfeit designer labels. Bangkok also has the best English-language bookshops in the country. Department stores and tourist-oriented shops in the city keep late hours, opening daily at 10 or 11am and closing at about 9pm; many small, upmarket boutiques, for example along Thanon Charoen Krung and Thanon Silom, close on Sundays.

Downtown Bangkok is full of smart, multistoreyed **shopping plazas** like Siam Paragon, Siam Centre, Emporium and Gaysorn Plaza, which is where you'll find the majority of the city's fashion stores, as well as designer lifestyle goods and bookshops. You're more likely to find useful items in one of the city's numerous **department stores**, most of which are also scattered about the downtown areas. Seven-storey Central Chidlom on Thanon Ploenchit, which boasts handy services like watch-, garment- and shoe-repair booths as well as a huge product selection (including large sizes), is probably the city's best (with other Central branches on Thanon Silom and around town), but the Siam Paragon department store (which also offers garment and shoe repairs), in the shopping centre of the same name on Thanon Rama I, and Robinson's (on Sukhumvit Soi 19, at the Silom/Rama IV junction and on Thanon Charoen Krung near Thanon Sathorn) are also good. They all have **children's** departments selling bottles, slings and clothes, or there's the branch of Mothercare inside the Emporium between Sukhumvit sois 22 and 24. The British chain of **pharmacies**, Boots the Chemist, has lots of branches across the city, including on Thanon Khao San, in the Siam Centre opposite Siam Square, on Patpong, in the Times Square complex between Sukhumvit sois 12 and 14, and in Emporium on Sukhumvit; Boots is the easiest place in the city to buy tampons.

The best place to buy anything to do with **mobile phones**, including rechargeable Thai SIM cards with a local phone number (see p.80), is the scores of small booths on Floor 4 of Mah Boon Krong (MBK) Shopping Centre at the Rama I/Phrayathai intersection. For **computer** hardware and software, the undisputed mecca is Panthip Plaza, across from Pratunam Market at 604/3 Thanon Phetchaburi (BTS Ratchathevi or canal stop Tha Pratunam), crammed with new and used, genuine and pirated hardware and software.

Markets

For travellers, spectating, not shopping, is apt to be the main draw of Bangkok's neighbourhood **markets** – notably the bazaars of Chinatown (see p.139) and the blooms and scents of Pak Khlong Talat, the flower and vegetable market just west of Memorial Bridge (see p.143). The massive Chatuchak Weekend Market is an exception, being both a tourist attraction and a marvellous shopping experience (see p.159 for details). If you're planning on some serious market exploration, get hold of *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok*, an enthusiastically annotated creation with special sections on the main areas of interest. With the chief exception of Chatuchak, most markets operate daily from dawn till early afternoon; early morning is often the best time to go to beat the heat and crowds. The Patpong **night market**, which also spills out onto Thanon Silom and Thanon Suriwong, is *the* place to stock up on fake designer goods, from pseudo-Rolex watches to Burberry shirts; the stalls open at about 5pm until late into the evening. A recent arrival on the evening shopping scene is the **Suan Lum Night Bazaar**, opposite Lumphini Park at the corner of Thanon Rama IV and Thanon Witthayu (Wireless Road; Ⓦwww.thainightbazaar.com), a huge development of more than three thousand booths, which is at its best between 6 and 10pm. Down the narrow alleys of tiny booths, you'll find colourful street fashions, jewellery and lots of soaps, candles and beauty products, as well as some interesting contemporary decor: lighting, paintings, ceramics and woodcarving. At the centre stands the Traditional Thai Puppet Theatre (see p.176), with a popular Thai terrace-restaurant in front, and the attractive women's clothes and furnishings, notably rugs, of the Doi Tung at Mae Fah Luang shop (see below), with a hip Doi Tung coffee house attached. Other options for eating and drinking are uninspiring – your best bet is probably the open-air food court and beer garden, with a stage for nightly live music, by Thanon Witthayu.

Handicrafts, textiles and contemporary interior design

Samples of nearly all regionally produced **handicrafts** end up in Bangkok, and many of the shopping plazas have at least one classy handicraft outlet. Bangkok is also rapidly establishing a reputation for its **contemporary interior design**, fusing minimalist Western ideals with traditional Thai and other Asian craft elements. The best places to sample this, as detailed in the reviews below, are on Floor 4 of the Siam Discovery Centre and Floor 4 of the Siam Paragon shopping centre, both on Thanon Rama I, and Floor 3 of the Gaysorn Plaza on Thanon Ploenchit.

The cheapest outlet for traditional northern and northeastern textiles – including sarongs, axe pillows and farmers' shirts – is **Chatuchak Weekend Market** (see p.159), where you'll also be able to nose out some interesting handicrafts. Noted for its thickness and sheen, **Thai silk** became internationally recognized only about fifty years ago after the efforts of American Jim Thompson (see box on p.152). Much of it comes from the northeast, but you'll find a good range of outlets in the capital. Prices start at about B500 per metre for two-ply silk (suitable for thin shirts and skirts), or B750 for four-ply (for suits).

Banglamphu

Taekee Taekon 118 Thanon Phra Athit. Tasteful assortment of traditional textiles and scarves, plus a selection of Thai art cards, black-and-white photocards and Nancy Chandler greetings cards.

Downtown: around Siam Square and Thanon Ploenchit

Ayodhya Floor 4, Siam Paragon, Thanon Rama I, Floor 3, Gaysorn Plaza, Thanon Ploenchit and Floor 4, Emporium, Thanon Sukhumvit. With the same owners and designers as Panta (see below), but specializing in smaller items, such as gorgeous cushion covers, pouffes covered in dried water-hyacinth stalks, bowls, trays and stationery.

Earthasia 1045 Thanon Ploenchit (opposite Soi Ruam Rudee). Contemporary basketware, furniture, rugs and beautiful lotus-bud lamps in vivid colours.

Doi Tung by Mae Fah Luang 4th Floor, Siam Discovery Centre, Thanon Rama I, and Suan Lum

Night Bazaar, Thanon Rama IV ⓦ www.doitung.org. Part of the late Princess Mother's development project based at Doi Tung, selling very attractive fabrics (silk, cotton and linen) in warm colours, either in bolts or made up into clothes, cushion covers, rugs and so on.

Exotique Thai Floor 4, Siam Paragon, Thanon Rama I. A collection of small outlets from around the city and the country – including silk-makers and clothes designers down from Chiang Mai – that makes a good, upmarket one-stop shop, much more interesting than Narai Phand (see below). There's everything from jewellery, through mother-of-pearl furniture, to beauty products, with a focus on home decor and contemporary adaptations of traditional crafts.

Lamont Contemporary Floor 3, Gaysorn Plaza, Thanon Ploenchit. Beautiful lacquerware bowls, vases and boxes in imaginative contemporary styles, as well as bronze and ceramic objects.

Narai (or Narayana) Phand 127 Thanon Rajdamri (ⓦ www.naraiphand.com). This souvenir centre was set up to ensure the preservation of traditional crafts and to maintain standards of quality, as a joint venture with the Ministry of Industry in the 1930s, and it looks it: its layout is wholly unappealing, though it makes a reasonable one-stop shop for last-minute presents. It offers a huge assortment of very reasonably priced goods from all over the country, including silk and cotton, *khon* masks and musical instruments, *bencharong*, nielloware and celadon, woodcarving, silver, basketware and beauty products.

Niwat (Aranyik) Floor 3, Gaysorn Plaza, Thanon Ploenchit. A good place to buy that chunky, elegant Thai-style cutlery you may have been eating your dinner with in Bangkok's posher restaurants, with both traditional and contemporary handmade designs.

Panta Floor 4, Siam Discovery Centre, and Floor 4, Siam Paragon. Modern design store which stands out for its experimental furniture, including way-out-there items made of woven rattan and wood and cushions covered in dried water-hyacinth stalks, string and rag clippings.

Thann Native Floor 3, Gaysorn Plaza, Thanon Ploenchit. Contemporary rugs, cushion covers and furniture, and some very striking glass candleholders.

Triphum Floor 3, Gaysorn Plaza, Thanon Ploenchit, and Floor 4, Siam Paragon. Affordable, hand-painted reproductions of temple mural paintings, Buddhist manuscripts from Burma, repro Buddha statues in many styles, lacquerware, framed amulets and even Buddha's footprints.

Downtown: south of Thanon Rama IV

Jim Thompson's Thai Silk Company Main shop at 9 Thanon Suriwong (including a branch of their very good café – see p.167), plus branches in Isetan in the Central World Plaza, Central Chidlom department store on Thanon Ploenchit, at Emporium on Thanon Sukhumvit, at the Jim Thompson House Museum, and at many hotels around the city, ⓦ www.jimthompson.com. A good place to start looking for traditional Thai fabric, or at least to get an idea of what's out there. Stocks silk and cotton by the yard and ready-made items from dresses to cushion covers, which are well designed and of good quality, but pricey. They also have a home furnishings section and a good tailoring service. A couple of hundred metres along Thanon Suriwong from the main branch, at no. 149/4–6, a Jim Thompson Factory Sales Outlet sells remnant home-furnishing fabrics and home accessories at knock-down prices (if you're really keen on a bargain, they have a much larger factory outlet way out east of the centre on Soi 93, Thanon Sukhumvit).

The Legend Floor 3, Thaniya Plaza, Thanon Silom. Stocks a small selection of well-made Thai handicrafts, from wood and wickerware to pretty fabrics and celadon and other ceramics, at reasonable prices.

Silom Village 286/1 Thanon Silom. A complex of low-rise buildings that attempts to create a relaxing, upcountry atmosphere as a backdrop for its pricey fabrics and jewellery, and occasionally unusual souvenirs, such as woven rattan goods and grainy *sa* paper made from mulberry bark.

Tamnan Mingmuang 3rd Floor, Thaniya Plaza, Soi Thaniya, east end of Thanon Silom. Subsidiary of The Legend opposite (see above) which concentrates on basketry from all over the country. Among the unusual items on offer are trays and boxes for tobacco and betel nut made from *yan lipao* (intricately woven fern vines), and bambooware sticky rice containers, baskets and lampshades. The Legend's other subsidiary, the adjacent Eros, sells rather tacky erotic craft items such as naked chess sets.

Thanon Sukhumvit

Rasi Sayam 82 Soi 33. Very classy handicraft shop, specializing in eclectic and fairly pricey decorative and folk arts such as tiny betel-nut sets woven from *lipao* fern, sticky-rice lunch baskets, coconut wood bowls and *mutmee* textiles. Mon–Sat 9am–5.30pm.

Thai Celadon Soi 16 (Thanon Ratchadapisek). Classic celadon stoneware made without commercial dyes or clays and glazed with the archetypal blues and greens that were invented by the Chinese to emulate the colour of precious jade. Mainly dinner sets, vases and lamps, plus some figurines.

Tailored clothes

Inexpensive **tailoring shops** crowd Silom, Sukhumvit and Khao San roads, but the best single area to head for is the short stretch of Thanon Charoen Krung between the GPO and Thanon Silom, close by the Chao Phraya express-boat stops at Tha Oriental and Tha Wat Muang Kae, or ten minutes' walk from Saphan Taksin Skytrain station. It's generally best to avoid tailors in tourist areas such as Thanon Khao San, shopping malls and Thanon Sukhumvit's Soi Nana and Soi 11, although if you're lucky it's still possible to come up trumps here: one that stands apart is Banglamphu's well-regarded Chang Torn, located at 95 Thanon Tanao (ⓣ02 282 9390). All the outlets listed below are recommended.

Prices vary widely depending on material and the tailor's skill. As a very rough guide, for labour alone expect to pay B5000–6000 for a two-piece suit, though some tailors will charge rather more. For middling material, expect to pay about the same again, or anything up to four times as much for top-class cloth. Special deals offering two suits, two shirts, two ties and a kimono for US$99 should be left well alone.

A Song Tailor 8 Trok Chartered Bank, off Thanon Charoen Krung, near the *Oriental Hotel* ⓣ02 630 9708. Friendly, helpful and a good first port of call if you're on a budget.

Ah Song Tailor 1203 Thanon Charoen Krung (opposite Soi 36) ⓣ02 233 7574. Meticulous tailor who takes pride in his work. Men's and women's suits.

Golden Wool 1340–1342 Thanon Charoen Krung ⓣ02 233 0149; and **World Group** 1302–1304 Thanon Charoen Krung, ⓣ02 234 1527. Part of the same company, they can turn around decent work in a couple of days, though prefer to have a week. One of the tailors here has made suits for the king.

Marco Tailor Soi 7, Siam Square ⓣ02 252 0689 or 02 251 7633. Long-established tailor with a good reputation, though not cheap by Bangkok standards; they require two or three weeks for a suit. Men's only.

Marzotto Tailor 3 Soi Shangri-la Hotel, Thanon Charoen Krung ⓣ02 233 2880. Friendly business which makes everything from trousers to wedding outfits.

Fashions

Thanon Khao San is lined with stalls selling low-priced **fashions** aimed at backpackers and urban Thai trendies. For the best and latest trends from Thai designers, however, check out the shops in Siam Square and across the road in the more upmarket Siam Centre. Prices vary considerably: street gear in Siam Square is undoubtedly inexpensive, while genuine Western brand names are generally competitive but not breathtakingly cheaper than at home; larger sizes can be hard to find. **Shoes** and **leather goods** are good buys in Bangkok, being generally handmade from high-quality leather and quite a bargain: check out branches of the stylish, Italian-influenced Ragazze in the Silom Complex (Floor 2), Thanon Silom, in the menswear department at Isetan in the Central World Plaza or on Floor 3 of the MBK Shopping Centre (both Thanon Rama I).

Emporium Thanon Sukhumvit, between sois 22 and 24. Enormous and rather glamorous shopping plaza, with a good range of fashion outlets, from exclusive designer wear to trendy high-street gear. Genuine brand name outlets include Versace, Prada, Gucci, Chanel Louis Vuitton – and Mango.

Gaysorn Plaza Thanon Ploenchit. The most chic of the city's shopping plazas: in amongst Burberry, Emporio Armani and Louis Vuitton, a few Thai names have made it, notably Fly Now, which mounts dramatic displays of women's party and formal gear, alongside more casual wear, and Fashion Society, a gathering of cutting-edge local designers in one store.

Mah Boon Krong (MBK) At the Rama I/Phrayathai intersection. Labyrinthine shopping centre which houses hundreds of small, mostly fairly inexpensive outlets, including plenty of high-street fashion shops.

Siam Centre Thanon Rama I, across the road from Siam Square. Particularly good for hip local labels, such as Greyhound, Jaspal and Fly Now, as well as international names like Ecko and Mambo.

Siam Square Worth poking around the alleys here, especially near what's styled as the area's "Centerpoint" between sois 3 and 4. All manner of inexpensive boutiques, some little more than booths, sell colourful street gear to the capital's fashionable students and teenagers.

Books

English-language **bookstores** in Bangkok are always well stocked with everything to do with Thailand, and most carry fiction classics and popular paperbacks as well. The capital's **secondhand** bookstores are not cheap, but you can usually part-exchange your unwanted titles.

Aporia 131 Thanon Tanao, Banglamphu. This is one of Banglamphu's main outlets for new books and keeps a good stock of titles on Thai and Southeast Asian culture, a decent selection of travelogues, plus some English-language fiction. Also sells secondhand books.

Asia Books Branches on Thanon Sukhumvit between sois 15 and 19, in Landmark Plaza between sois 4 and 6, in Times Square between sois 12 and 14, and in Emporium between sois 22 and 24; in Peninsula Plaza and in the Central World Plaza, both on Thanon Rajdamri; in Siam Discovery Centre and in Siam Paragon, both on Thanon Rama I; and in Thaniya Plaza near Patpong off Thanon Silom. English-language bookstore that's especially recommended for its books on Asia – everything from guidebooks to cookery books, novels to art (the Sukhumvit 15–19 branch has the very best Asian selection). Also stocks bestselling novels and coffee-table books.

B2S Floor 7, Central Chidlom, Thanon Ploenchit. Department-store bookshop with a decent selection of English-language books, but most notable for its huge selection of magazines and newspapers.

Bookazine Branches on Thanon Silom in the CP Tower (Patpong) and in the Silom Complex; on Thanon Rama I opposite the Siam Centre; in the Amarin Plaza on Thanon Ploenchit; in All Seasons Place on Thanon Witthayu; in Gaysorn Plaza on Thanon Ploenchit; and at the mouth of Sukhumvit Soi 5. Alongside a decent selection of English-language books about Asia and novels, these shops stock a huge range of foreign newspapers and magazines.

Books Kinokuniya 3rd Floor, Emporium Shopping Centre, between sois 22 and 24 on Thanon Sukhumvit, with branches at Floor 6, Isetan, in the Central World Plaza, Thanon Rajdamri, and Floor 3, Siam Paragon, Thanon Rama I. Huge English-language bookstore with a broad range of books ranging from bestsellers to travel literature and from classics to sci-fi; not so hot on books about Asia though.

Dasa Book Cafe Between sois 26 and 28, Thanon Sukhumvit Ⓦ www.dasabookcafe.com. Appealingly calm secondhand bookshop that's intelligently, and alphabetically, categorized, with sections on everything from Asia to chick-lit, health to gay and lesbian interest. Browse its stock online, or enjoy coffee and cakes in situ. Daily 10am–9pm

Shaman Books *Thanon* Khao San, Banglamphu. Well-stocked secondhand bookshop where all books are logged on the computer. Lots of books on Asia (travel, fiction, politics and history) as well as a decent range of novels and general interest books.

Ton's Bookseller 327/5 Thanon Ram Bhuttri, Banglamphu. Exceptionally well stocked with titles about Thailand and Southeast Asia, particularly political commentary and language studies; also sells some English-language fiction.

Jewellery, gems and other rare stones

Bangkok boasts the country's best **gem and jewellery** shops, and some of the finest lapidaries in the world, making this *the* place to buy cut and uncut stones such as rubies, blue sapphires and diamonds. However, countless gem-buying tourists get badly **ripped off**, so be extremely wary. Never buy anything through a tout or from any shop recommended by a "government official"/"student"/

”businessperson”/tuk-tuk driver who just happens to engage you in conversation on the street, and note that there are no government jewellery shops despite any information you may be given to the contrary. Always check that the shop is a member of the **Thai Gem and Jewelry Traders Association** by calling the association or visiting their website (ⓣ02 630 1390–7, ⓦwww.thaigemjewelry.or.th). To be doubly sure, you may want to seek out shops that also belong to the TGJTA's **Jewel Fest Club** (ⓦwww.jewelfest.com), which guarantees quality and will offer refunds; see their website for a directory of members. For independent professional advice or precious stones certification, contact the Asian Institute of Gemological Sciences, located on the sixth floor of the Jewelry Trade Center Building, 919/1 Thanon Silom (ⓣ02 267 4325–7, ⓦwww.aigsthailand.com), which also runs reputable **courses**, such as a five-day (15hr) introduction to gemstones (B7500) and one day on rubies and sapphires (B1500). A common **scam** is to charge a lot more than what the gem is worth based on its carat weight. Get it tested on the spot, and ask for a written guarantee and receipt. Don't even consider **buying gems in bulk** to sell at a supposedly vast profit elsewhere: many a gullible traveller has invested thousands of dollars on a handful of worthless multi-coloured stones, believing the vendor's reassurance that the goods will fetch a hundred times more when resold at home. Gem scams are so common in Bangkok that TAT has published a brochure about it and there are several websites on the subject, including the very informative ⓦwww.2bangkok.com/2bangkok/Scams/Sapphire.shtml, which describes the typical scam in detail and advises on what to do if you get caught out; it's also continuously updated with details of the latest scammers. Most victims get no recompense at all, but you have more chance of doing so if you contact the website's recommended authorities while still in Thailand. See p.69 for more on common scams in Thailand.

The most exclusive of the reputable **gem outlets** are scattered along Thanon Silom, but many tourists prefer to buy from hotel shops, like the very upscale Kim's in Oriental Place in front of the *Oriental*, where reliability is assured. Other recommended outlets include Johnny's Gems at 199 Thanon Fuang Nakhon, near Wat Rajabophit in Ratanakosin; and Merlin et Delaunay at 1 Soi Pradit, off Thanon Suriwong. Thongtavee, Floor 2, River City, an outlet of a famous Burmese **jade** factory in Mae Sai in northern Thailand, sells beautiful jade jewellery, as well as carved Buddha statues, chopsticks and the like. The hub of Bangkok's **gold** trade is Chinatown, specifically Thanon Yaowarat, which boasts over a hundred outlets. For cheap **silver** earrings, bracelets and necklaces, you can't beat the traveller-oriented jewellery shops along Trok Mayom in Banglamphu.

Antiques and paintings

Bangkok is the entrepôt for the finest Thai, Burmese and Cambodian **antiques**, but the market has long been sewn up, so don't expect to happen upon any undiscovered treasure. Even experts admit that they sometimes find it hard to tell real antiques from fakes, so the best policy is just to buy on the grounds of attractiveness. The River City shopping complex, off Thanon Charoen Krung (New Road), devotes its third and fourth floors to a bewildering array of pricey treasures, as well as holding an auction on the first Saturday of every month (viewing during the preceding week). Worth singling out here are Old Maps and Prints on the fourth floor (ⓦwww.classicmaps.com), which has some lovely old prints of Thailand and Asia (averaging around B3500), as well as rare books and maps; and Ingon on the third floor, which specializes in small Chinese pieces made of jade and other precious stones, such as snuff boxes, jewellery, statuettes and amulets. The other main area for antiques is the section of Charoen Krung that runs between the GPO and the bottom of Thanon Silom, and the stretch of Silom running east from here up to and including the multistorey Silom Galleria. Here you'll find a good selection of largely reputable individual businesses specializing in woodcarvings, ceramics, bronze statues and stone sculptures culled from all parts of Thailand and neighbouring countries as well. The owners of Old Maps and Prints have a second outlet, the Old Siam Trading Company in the Nailert Building at the mouth of Thanon Sukhumvit Soi 5 (Ⓦwww.oldsiamtrading.com). Remember that most antiques require an export permit (see p.76).

Street-corner stalls all over the city sell poor-quality mass-produced traditional Thai **paintings**, but for a huge selection of Thai art, especially oil paintings, visit Sombat Permpoon Gallery on Sukhumvit Soi 1, which carries thousands of canvases, framed and unframed, spanning the range from classical Ayutthayan-era-style village scenes to twenty-first-century abstracts.

Moving on

Bangkok is the best place to make arrangements for **onward travel from Thailand** and the city's **travel agents** can offer some good flight deals. The cheapest of these come from agents who don't belong to the Association of Thai Travel Agents (ATTA), though many of these are transient and not altogether trustworthy. Thanon Khao San is a notorious centre for dodgy operators: if you buy from a non-ATTA outlet, don't hand over any money until you've called the airline to check your reservation personally, and have been given the ticket. To check if an agency is affiliated, ask for proof of membership and check with the ATTA office (Ⓣ02 237 6046–8, Ⓦwww.atta.or.th). Some tried and tested travel agents are given in "Listings", p.191.

All the main Asian embassies are in Bangkok, so getting the appropriate **visas** should be no problem. Some travellers prefer to avoid trudging out to the relevant embassy by paying one of the Khao San travel agencies to get their visa for them; beware of doing this, however, as some agencies are reportedly **faking the stamps**, which causes serious problems at immigration.

All major **airline offices** are also in downtown Bangkok. There's no advantage in buying tickets directly from the airlines – their phone numbers are given in "Listings", p.188, so you can confirm reservations or change dates.

The **international departure tax** on all foreigners leaving Thailand by air is B500, but will rise to B700 on February 1, 2007; buy your voucher near the check-in desks at the airport. For advice on getting to Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang Airports, see p.187. For more airport information, see p.91.

Travel within Thailand

Public transport between Bangkok and the beaches is inexpensive and plentiful, if not particularly speedy.

△ Hualamphong Station

By train

Nearly all trains depart from **Hualamphong Station**; exceptions include a couple of the Hua Hin trains, which leave from **Thonburi Station** (sometimes still referred to by its former name, **Bangkok Noi Station**), across the river from Banglamphu in Thonburi, about an 850m walk west of the express-boat stop. The 24-hour "Information" booth at Hualamphong Station keeps English-language **timetables**, or you can try phoning the Train Information Hotline on ⓣ1690; the State Railway of Thailand website (ⓦwww.railway.co.th) also carries timetables and a fare chart. For a guide to destinations and journey times from Bangkok, see "Travel Details" on p.191. For details on city transport to and from Hualamphong, left-luggage facilities at the station, and a warning about **con-artists** operating at the station, see the section on "Arriving in Bangkok" on p.95.

Tickets for overnight trains and other busy routes should be booked at least a day in advance (or at least a week in advance for travel on national holidays), and are best bought from Hualamphong. During normal office hours you can buy rail tickets from the clearly signed State Railway **advance booking office** at the back of the station concourse (daily 8.30am–4pm); at other times you can buy them from ticket counter #2, which is labelled "foreign tourist priority"; counters #1 and #2 deal with ticket refunds and alterations. Train tickets can also be bought through almost any travel agent and through some hotels and guest houses for a booking fee of about B50. In addition to all types of normal rail ticket, the Advance Booking Office sells **joint rail and boat or rail and bus tickets** to Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan, Ko Tao, Krabi and Ko Phi Phi. Sample prices include B668 to Surat Thani (second-class air-con sleeper), plus B150 for bus and boat connections to Ko Samui or B200 for bus connections to Krabi.

By bus

Bangkok's three main bus terminals are distributed around the outskirts of town. Leave plenty of time to get to the bus terminals, especially if setting off from Banglamphu, from where you should allow at least an hour and a half (outside rush hour) to get to the Eastern Bus Terminal, and a good hour to get to the Northern or Southern terminals. Seats on the most popular long-distance air-con bus services (such as to Krabi, Phuket and Surat Thani) should be **reserved** ahead of time, ideally at the relevant bus station as hotels and guest houses may book you on to one of the dodgy tourist services described below.

The **Northern Bus Terminal**, or **Sathaanii Mo Chit** (☎02 936 2852–66), is the departure point for a few services to the east-coast destinations of Pattaya, Chanthaburi and Trat: though there are more regular services to the east coast from the Eastern Bus Terminal, journey times from Mo Chit are usually slightly shorter. The Northern Bus Terminal is on Thanon Kamphaeng Phet 2, near Chatuchak Weekend Market in the far north of the city; Mo Chit Skytrain station and Kamphaeng Phet subway station are within a short motorbike taxi or tuk-tuk ride, or take a city bus direct to the bus terminal: air-con #503, #512 and #157 run from Banglamphu and non-air-con #159 runs from the Southern Bus Terminal; see box on pp.100–01 for bus route details.

The **Eastern Bus Terminal**, or **Sathaanii Ekamai** (☎02 391 8097), between Sukhumvit sois 40 and 42, serves east-coast destinations such as Pattaya, Ban Phe (for Ko Samet) and Trat (for Ko Chang). The Skytrain stops right by the bus terminal at Ekamai Station, as do city buses #511 (from Banglamphu) and #59 (from the Northern Bus Terminal); see box on p.101 for bus route details. Alternatively you can take the Khlong Saen Saeb boat service from the Golden Mount (see p.102) to Tha Ekamai (Sukhumvit Soi 63) and then hop into a taxi down Soi 63 to the bus terminal. There's a rudimentary **left-luggage** service at Ekamai (daily 8am–6pm; B30/day). If you happen to have time to kill at Ekamai, you could sip coffee and check emails at the plush *Ban Rie Coffee* experience across the road (see p.168), or there's a cineplex a few minutes' walk west, between sois 61 and 63.

The **Southern Bus Terminal**, or **Sathaanii Sai Tai Mai** (☎02 435 1199), is at the junction of Thanon Borom Ratchonni and the Nakhon Chaisri Highway, west of the Chao Phraya River in Thonburi. It handles departures to all points south of the capital, including Hua Hin, Chumphon (for Ko Tao), Surat Thani (for Ko Samui and Ko Pha Ngan), Phuket and Krabi. To get here, take city bus #507 (air-con) from Banglamphu or Hualamphong Station, air-con #511 from Banglamphu or Thanon Sukhumvit, or non-air-con #159 from the Northern Bus Terminal (see box on pp.100–01 for bus route details).

Budget transport

Many Bangkok tour operators offer **budget transport** to major tourist destinations such as Surat Thani, Krabi, Ko Samet and Ko Chang. This often works out as cheap if not cheaper than the equivalent fare on a public air-con bus and, as most of the budget transport deals leave from the Thanon Khao San area in Banglamphu, they're often more convenient. The main drawbacks, however, are the **lack of comfort** and **poor safety**: some travellers end up wishing they'd taken a public air-con bus instead (see below, and Basics p.40 for more info), and in many cases that's what we'd advise. It is standard practice for **tour operators**, especially those on Thanon Khao San, to assure you that transport will be in a large, luxury VIP bus despite knowing it's actually a clapped out old banger. Also be aware that tour operators open up and go bust all the time, again, particularly in the Thanon Khao San area, so consult other travellers for recommendations; never hand over any money until you see the ticket. If you do use budget transport, keep your valuables on your person at all times during your journey: this is especially crucial on overnight services.

For the shorter trips, for example to **Ko Samet** (B200–250 excluding boat) and **Laem Ngop**, the departure point for Ko Chang (B180–350 excluding boat), transport operators nearly always take passengers in minibuses which, if crowded, can be unbearably cramped, and often have insufficient air-conditioning. Drivers usually go as fast as possible, which some travellers find scary. For destinations further afield, such as **Surat Thani** (11hr), travellers are usually taken by larger tour bus; again these tend to be worn-out old things (despite invariably being advertised as VIP-style) and drivers on these journeys have an even worse safety record. **Security** on these buses is a serious problem, and because they're run by private companies there is no insurance against loss or theft of baggage: don't keep anything of value in luggage that's stored out of sight, even if it's padlocked, as luggage gets slashed and rifled in the roomy luggage compartment. In addition, passengers often find themselves dumped on the outskirts of their destination city, at the mercy of unscrupulous touts. If you are planning a journey to Surat Thani, consider taking the train instead – the extra comfort and peace of mind are well worth the extra baht – or at the least, opt for a government bus from the relevant terminal (see opposite).

If you're heading for an **island** (such as **Ko Samui**, **Ko Tao** or **Ko Chang**), your bus should get you to the ferry port in time to catch the boat, though there have been complaints from travellers that this does not always happen; check whether your bus ticket covers the ferry ride.

By air

During high season, **flights** on the most popular domestic routes (to Ko Samui, Phuket and Krabi) should be booked as far in advance as possible. Most domestic airlines offer online booking services, and tickets can also be bought at the airport if available; the **domestic departure tax** is included in the price of the ticket. Thai Airways is the main domestic carrier and flies to over twenty major towns and cities; between them, the other main domestic carriers – Bangkok Airways, Air Asia, Nok Air, One-Two-Go and PB Air – currently cover another twenty minor routes out of the capital (see Basics p.42 for details), though schedules are often erratic on the least popular routings. All scheduled domestic flights leave from Suvarnabhumi Airport (see p.91); for airline phone numbers see "Listings"on p.188.

The fastest, most expensive way of getting to Suvarnabhumi Airport is by **metered taxi,** which can cost anything from B120 to B350 (plus up to B70 in expressway tolls), depending on where you are and how bad the traffic is. If you leave the downtown areas before 7am you can get to the airport in half an hour, but at other times you should set off an hour and a half before you have to check in. A cheaper and (during rush hour) faster option from downtown areas is to take the **Skytrain** to On Nut in the east of the city and then either take bus #552 for the last few kilometres to Suvarnabhumi, or flag down a taxi.

Every guest house and travel agent in Banglamphu, and many hotels elsewhere in the city, can book you onto one of the **private minibuses** to Suvarnabhumi Airport. Those running from Banglamphu depart approximately every hour, day and night, and cost B60–80; though you'll get picked up from your accommodation, you should book yourself onto a minibus that leaves at least an hour and a half before check-in commences as it can take up to 45 minutes to pick up all passengers, after which there's the traffic to contend with.

The **airport bus services** that are so useful when arriving at Suvarnabhumi are less reliable on the outward journey, mainly because the traffic often makes it impossible for them to stick to their half-hourly schedules; at B150 it's not a risk worth taking.

As with in-bound **trains**, schedules for trains from Hualamphong to Don Muang are not helpfully spread throughout the day (ask at the station for the timetable), but the service is cheap and fast. A number of **city buses** run from the city to Don muang and are detailed in the box on pp.100–01; they are slow and crowded however.

Listings

Airport enquiries Suvarnabhumi: general enquiries ⓣ02 132 1888; departures ⓣ02 132 9324-5; arrivals ⓣ02 132 9328-9.

Airlines, domestic Air Asia ⓣ02 515 9999; Bangkok Airways, 99/14 Thanon Wibhawadi Rangsit ⓣ02 265 5555 or 1771; Nok Air ⓣ1318 or 02 900 9955; One-Two-Go ⓣ1126; PB Air, UBC 2 Bldg, 591 Sukhumvit Soi 33 ⓣ02 261 0220–8; Phuket Airlines, 1168/102 34th Floor Lumphini Tower Bldg, Thanon Rama IV ⓣ02 679 8999; SGA, Domestic Terminal, Don Muang Airport ⓣ02 535 7050; Thai Airways, 485 Thanon Silom ⓣ02 232 8000 and 6 Thanon Lan Luang near Democracy Monument ⓣ02 356 1111.

Airlines, international Aeroflot ⓣ02 254 1180–2; Air Asia ⓣ02 515 9999; Air Canada ⓣ02 670 0400; Air France ⓣ02 635 1186–7; Air India ⓣ02 235 0557–8; Air New Zealand ⓣ02 254 8440; Bangkok Airways ⓣ02 265 5555, Biman Bangladesh Airlines ⓣ02 233 3896–7; British Airways ⓣ02 627 1701; Cathay Pacific ⓣ02 263 0606; China Airlines ⓣ02 250 9888; Druk Air ⓣ02 535 1960; Emirates ⓣ02 664 1040; Eva Air ⓣ02 240 0890; Finnair ⓣ02 635 1234; Garuda ⓣ02 679 7371–2; Gulf Air ⓣ02 254 7931–4; Japan Airlines ⓣ02 649 9500; KLM ⓣ02 679 1100; Korean Air ⓣ02 635 0465–9; Lao Airlines ⓣ02 236 9822; Lauda Air ⓣ02 267 0873; Lufthansa ⓣ02 264 2400; Malaysia Airlines ⓣ02 263 0565–71; Pakistan International (PIA) ⓣ02 234 2961–5; Philippine Airlines ⓣ02 633 5713; Qantas Airways ⓣ02 627 1701; Royal Brunei ⓣ02 637 5151; Singapore Airlines ⓣ02 353 6000; Sri Lankan Airlines ⓣ02 236 8450; Swiss ⓣ02 636 2150; Thai Airways ⓣ02 356 1111; United Airlines ⓣ02 253 0558; Vietnam Airlines ⓣ02 655 4137–40.

Car rental Avis, ⓦwww.avis.com: 2/12 Thanon Witthayu (Wireless Road) ⓣ02 255 5300–4. Budget, ⓦwww.budget.co.th: 19/23 Building A, Royal City Avenue, Thanon Phetchaburi Mai ⓣ02 203 0250; Suvarnabhumi Airport ⓣ089 896 4539. SMT Rent-A-Car (part of National), ⓦwww.smtrentacar.com: 727 Thanon Srinakharin ⓣ02 722 8487; Don Muang Airport train station, Thanon Vibhavadi Rangsit ⓣ02 928 2500.

Cookery classes Nearly all the five-star hotels will arrange Thai cookery classes for guests if requested; the most famous are held at the *Oriental Hotel* (ⓣ02 659 9000; US$120/day), which mainly focus on demonstrating culinary techniques (Mon–Thurs each week), with a chance for hands-on practice on Fri and Sat. There's a more hands-on approach at the *Nipa* restaurant (ⓣ02 254 0404, ⓦwww.landmarkbangkok.com), which runs one- to five-day cookery courses on demand (B1950/person/day, but cheaper in groups and for longer courses), and add-on fruit-carving lessons (daily 2–4pm; B450) at the restaurant on the third floor of the Landmark Plaza, between sois 4 and 6 on Thanon Sukhumvit. *Basil* at the *Sheraton Grande*, between sois 12 and 14 on Thanon Sukhumvit runs afternoon classes (Mon–Sat ⓣ02 649 8366, ⓦwww.sheratongrandesukhumvit.com; B1950). In a grand, century-old building at 233 Thanon Sathorn Tai (ⓣ02 673 9353–8, ⓦwww.blueelephant.com), the *Blue Elephant* offers courses that range from B2800 for a half-day to a five-day private course for professional chefs for B68,000, while Banglamphu's famous veggie cook, May Kaidee, shares her culinary expertise at her restaurant at 117/1Thanon Tanao (ⓣ089 137 3173, ⓦwww.maykaidee.com; see p.162) for B1000 per day. Set in an orchard in a rural part of Nonthaburi, *Thai House* (ⓣ02 903 9611 or 997 5161, ⓦwww.thaihouse.co.th) runs one- (B3500) to three-day (B16,650) cooking courses, the latter including vegetable- and fruit-carving and home-stay accommodation in traditional wooden houses.

Couriers DHL Worldwide has several central Bangkok depots, including on Thanon Silom and Thanon Sukhumvit; call ⓣ02 345 5000 or visit ⓦwww.dhl.co.th for details.

Embassies and consulates See ⓦwww.mfa.go.th for a full list, with links. Australia, 37 Thanon Sathorn Tai ⓣ02 344 6300; Burma (Myanmar), 132 Thanon Sathorn Nua ⓣ02 233 2237; Cambodia, 185 Thanon Rajdamri (enter via Thanon Sarasin) ⓣ02 254 6630; Canada, 15th floor, Abdulrahim Place, 990 Thanon Rama IV ⓣ02 636 0540; China, 57 Thanon Rajadapisek ⓣ02 245 7030–45; Germany, 9 Thanon Sathorn Tai ⓣ02 287 9000; India, 46, Sukhumvit Soi 23ⓣ02 258 0300–5; Indonesia, 600–602 Thanon Phetchaburi ⓣ02 252 3135–40; Ireland, 12th Floor, Tisco Tower, 48/20 Thanon Sathorn Nua ⓣ02 638 0303; Laos, 502/ 1–3 Soi Sahakarnpramoon, Thanon Pracha Uthit ⓣ02 539 6667–8, ext 1053; Malaysia, 35 Thanon Sathorn Tai ⓣ02 679 2190–9; Nepal, 189 Sukhumvit Soi 71 ⓣ02 391 7240; Netherlands, 15 Soi Tonson, between Thanon Witthayu (Wireless Road) and Soi Langsuan ⓣ02 309 5200; New Zealand, 14th Floor, M Thai Tower, All Seasons Place, 87 Thanon Witthayu ⓣ02 254 2530; Pakistan, 31 Sukhumvit Soi 3 ⓣ02 253 0288; Philippines, mouth of Sukhumvit Soi 30/1, ⓣ02 259 0139–40; Singapore, 129 Thanon Sathorn Tai ⓣ02 286 2111; South Africa, 6th Floor, The Park Place, 231 Thanon Sarasin ⓣ02 253 8473–6; Sri Lanka, 13th Floor, Ocean Tower II, Sukhumvit Soi 19 ⓣ02 261 1934; Vietnam, 83/1 Thanon Witthayu ⓣ02 251 5836–8, ext. 112 ; UK, 14 Thanon Witthayu ⓣ02 305 8333; US, 120 Thanon Witthayu ⓣ02 205 4000.

Emergencies For all emergencies, either call the tourist police (free 24hr phoneline ⓣ1155), who also maintain a booth in the Suan Lum Night Bazaar on Thanon Rama IV, visit the Banglamphu Police Station at the west end of Thanon Khao San, or contact the Tourist Police Headquarters, CMIC Tower, 209/1 Soi 21 (Thanon Asok Montri), Thanon Sukhumvit ⓣ02 664 4000.

Exchange The Suvarnabhumi Airport exchange desks and those in the upmarket hotels are open 24 hours; many other exchange booths stay open till 8pm, especially along Khao San, Sukhumvit and Silom. If you have a MasterCard/Cirrus or Visa debit or credit card, you can also withdraw cash from hundreds of ATMs around the city and at the airport.

Hospitals, clinics and dentists Most expats rate the private Bumrungrad International Hospital, 33 Sukhumvit Soi 3 ⓣ02 667 1000, emergency ⓣ02 667 2999, ⓦwww.bumrungrad.com, with its famously five-star accommodation, as the best and most comfortable in the city, followed by the BNH (Bangkok Nursing Home) Hospital, 9 Thanon Convent ⓣ02 686 2700, ⓦwww.bnhhospital.com; Bangkok International Hospital, 2 Soi Soonvijai 7, Thanon Phetchaburi Mai, ⓣ02 310 3000, emergency ⓣ02 310 3102, ⓦwww.bangkokhospital.com; and the Samitivej Sukhumvit Hospital, 133 Sukhumvit Soi 49 ⓣ02 711 8000, ⓦwww samitivej.co.th. Other recommended private hospitals include Bangkok Mission Hospital, 430 Thanon Phitsanulok, cnr Thanon Lan Luang, just east of Banglamphu ⓣ02 282 1100, ⓦwww.tagnet.org/mission-net, and Bangkok Christian Hospital, 124 Thanon Silom ⓣ02 233 6981–9. You can get vaccinations and malaria advice, as well as rabies advice and treatment, at the Thai Red Cross Society's Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute (QSMI) and Snake Farm on the corner of Thanon Rama IV and Thanon Henri Dunant (Mon–Fri 8.30am–noon & 1–4.30pm; ⓣ02 252 0161–4, ⓦwww.redcross.or.th). Among general clinics, the Australian-run Travmin Bangkok Medical Centre, 8th Floor, Alma Link Building, next to the Central Department Store at 25 Soi Chitlom, Thanon Ploenchit (ⓣ02 655 1024–5; B650/consultation), is recommended. For dental problems, try the Bumrungrad Hospital's dental department on ⓣ02 667 2300, or the following dental clinics (not 24hr): Care Dental Clinic 120/26 Soi Prasamnit 3, Sukhumvit Soi 23 ⓣ02 259 1604; Dental Hospital 88/88 Sukhumvit Soi 49 ⓣ02 260 5000–15, ⓦwww.dentalhospitalbangkok.com; Glas Haus Dental Centre, mouth of Sukhumvit Soi 25, ⓣ02 260 6120–2; Siam Family Dental Clinic 292/6 Siam Square Soi 4 ⓣ02 255 6664–5, ⓦwww.siamfamilydental.com.

Immigration office About 600m down Soi Suan Phlu, off Thanon Sathorn Tai (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm; ⓣ02 287 3101–10; ⓦwww.immigration.go.th); visa extensions take about an hour. They also send a weekly mobile office to Bumrungrad Hospital, 3rd Floor, Sukhumvit Soi 3 (Wed 9am–3pm). It's difficult to get through to the Suan Phlu office by phone, so you may be better off calling the the Department of Employment's One-Stop Service Centre for advice on ⓣ02 693 9333–9. Be very wary of any Khao San tour agents who offer to organize a visa extension for you: some are reportedly faking the relevant stamps and this has caused problems at immigration. However, many places organize "visa-run" trips, which take you and your passport, usually in a minivan, to the Cambodian border at Poipet and back within a day, charging around B2000 all in (the 30-day visa itself is free); East Meets West Travel, Sukhumvit Soi 12 (ⓣ02 251 5230, ⓦwww.eastmeetswesttravel.com), specializes in this service.

Internet access Banglamphu is packed with places offering Internet access, in particular along Thanon Khao San, where competition keeps prices very low. To surf in style, head for *True*, housed in a beautiful early-twentieth-century villa at the back of *Tom Yam Kung* restaurant at the western end of Thanon Khao San, where you also can sip coffee, recline on retro sofas and browse lifestyle mags. The Ratchadamnoen Post Office on Banglamphu's Soi Damnoen Klang Neua (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm) also has very cheap public Catnet Internet booths (see p.77), and there's also a cheap TNet centre next door. Outside Banglamphu, mid-range and upmarket hotels also offer Internet access, but at vastly inflated prices. Thanon Sukhumvit has a number of makeshift phone/Internet offices, as well as several more formal and more clued-up Internet cafés, including one opposite the 7/11 on Soi 11 (daily 9am–midnight), and the Time Internet Centre on the second floor of Times Square, between sois 12 and 14 (daily 9am–midnight). On the north side of Thanon Silom, between Soi 4 and Soi 2/1, Mr Bean offers civilized surfing (daily 9am–10pm) and very good coffee. Elsewhere in the downtown area, during the day, there are several, rather noisy, places on Floor 7 of the MBK Shopping Centre, while *Chart Café* on the ground floor of River City shopping centre offers a bit more style and tranquillity, as well as food and drink while you're online. There are Catnet centres in the public telephone office adjacent to the GPO on Thanon Charoen Krung (daily 7am–8pm), and at several locations within the Suvarnabhumi Airport passenger terminal.

Laundry Nearly all guest houses and hotels offer same-day laundry services, or there are several self-service laundries on Thanon Khao San.

Left luggage At Suvarnabhumi Airport (B100/day); Don Muang train station (B30/day); Ekamai Eastern Bus Terminal (B30/day); Hualamphong train station (B20–30/day); and at most hotels and guest houses (B10–20/day).

Mail The GPO is at 1160 Thanon Charoen Krung, a few hundred metres left of the exit for Wat Muang Kae express-boat stop. Poste restante, which is kept for two months, can be collected here. This and most other services at the GPO are open Mon–Fri 8am–8pm, Sat & Sun 8am–1pm; the parcel-packing service, however, operates Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm, Sat 9am–noon. If you're staying on or near Thanon Khao San in Banglamphu, it's more convenient to use the poste restante service at one of the two post offices in Banglamphu itself. The one closest to Khao San is Ratchadamnoen Post Office on the eastern stretch of Soi Damnoen Klang Neua (Mon–Fri 8am–5pm, Sat 9am–1pm); letters are kept for two months and should be addressed c/o Poste Restante, Ratchadamnoen PO, Bangkok 10200. There's an efficient parcel packing and sending service in the same building. Banglamphu's other post office is on Soi Sibsam Hang, just west of Wat Bowoniwes (Mon–Fri 8am–5pm, Sat 9am–1pm); its poste restante address is Banglamphubon PO, Bangkok 10203. In the Thanon Sukhumvit vicinity, poste restante can be sent to the Thanon Sukhumvit post office between sois 4 and 6, c/o Nana PO, Thanon Sukhumvit, Bangkok 10112 (Mon–Fri 8.30am–5.30pm, Sat 9am–noon).

Massage and spas Traditional Thai massage sessions and courses are held at Wat Pho (see p.132), and at dozens of guest houses in Banglamphu. More luxurious and indulgent spa and massage treatments are available at many posh hotels across the city, including most famously at the *Banyan Tree Hotel* on Thanon Sathorn Tai (ⓣ 02 679 1054, ⓦ www.banyantreespa.com) and the *Oriental* on Thanon Charoen Krung (ⓣ 02 439 7613, ⓦ www.mandarinoriental.com), and more affordably at *Buddy Lodge* on Thanon Khao San in Banglamphu (ⓣ 02 629 4477; Thai massage B800/60min; aromatic scrub B1500). One of Banglamphu's most popular massage centres is Pian's on Soi Susie Pub (daily 8am–10pm, ⓣ 02 629 0924, ⓦ www.piangroup.com), where a Thai massage costs B180/hr and you can study Thai, Swedish, herbal and foot massage (about B30,000 for a 30-hour course, or B250 for a one-hour introduction). In the Silom area, Ruen Nuad, 42 Thanon Convent (ⓣ 02 632 2662–3; daily 10am–9pm), offers excellent Thai massages (B550 for 2hr), as well as aromatherapy and herbal massages, in an air-conditioned, characterful wooden house, down an alley opposite the BNH Hospital and behind *Naj* restaurant. In Sukhumvit, Bann Phuan on Soi 11 is a recommended massage centre (Thai massage B200/hr), or for spa treatments there's Divana Massage and Spa at 7, Soi 25 (ⓣ 02 661 6784, ⓦ www.divanaspa.com; 2-hour spa from B2350). For more on spa treatments see Basics p.63.

Pharmacies There are English-speaking staff at most of the capital's pharmacies, including the city-wide branches of Boots the Chemist (most usefully on Thanon Khao San, in the Siam Centre on Thanon Rama I, on Patpong, and inside the Emporium on Thanon Sukhumvit).

Photographic services Most photo shops will download your digital photos onto a CD for about B150; there's no need to bring your own cables as they have card readers. In Banglamphu, try Center Digital Lab at 169 Thanon Khao San, next to *Grand Guest House*; on Sukhumvit, 11 Digital Photo has branches in Nana Square at the mouth of Soi 3 and near the *Federal Hotel* on Soi 11.

Telephones International cardphones are dotted all over the city, so there's now little call for the public telephone offices in or adjacent to post offices, though their booths do at least guarantee some peace and quiet. The largest and most convenient public telephone office is in the compound of the GPO on Thanon Charoen Krung (daily 7am–8pm), which also offers a fax and Internet service, a free collect-call service and even video-conferencing (see above for location details). The post offices at Hualamphong Station, on Thanon Sukhumvit (see opposite), and in Banglamphu (see opposite) also have international telephone offices attached, but these close at 5pm. Many entrepreneurs, particularly on Thanon Khao San, advertise very cheap international calls through the Internet: see Basics for details.

Travel agents Diethelm Travel has branches all over Thailand and Indochina and is especially good for travel to Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam: 12th Floor, Kian Gwan Building II, 140/1 Thanon Witthayu ⓣ02 255 9205–18, ⓦwww.diethelm-travel.com; Asian Trails sells flights, does interesting Thailand tours (see p.30) and runs scheduled and private transfers to many coastal destinations from Bangkok hotels and the airport: 9th Floor, SG Tower, 161/1 Soi Mahadlek Luang 3, Thanon Rajdamri ⓣ02 626 2000, ⓦwww.asiantrails.net; Educational Travel Centre (ETC) sells air tickets and Thailand tours and has offices inside the *Royal Hotel*, 2 Thanon Rajdamnoen Klang, Banglamphu ⓣ02 224 0043, ⓦwww.etc.co.th, at 180 Thanon Khao San, Banglamphu ⓣ02 282 7021, and at 5/3 Soi Ngam Duphli ⓣ02 286 9424; Olavi Travel sells air tickets and budget transport within Thailand and is opposite *Gullivers' Tavern* at 53 Thanon Chakrabongse, Banglamphu ⓣ02 629 4711–4, ⓦwww.olavi.com; the helpful Thai Overlander at 407 Thanon Sukhumvit, between sois 21 and 23, ⓣ02 258 4778-80, ⓦwww.thaioverlander.com does train tickets (B50 fee), day-trips and air tickets; Royal Exclusive is good for travel to Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, and also sells air and train tickets: 21 Thanon Silom ⓣ02 267 1536, ⓦwww.royalexclusive.com; and the Bangkok branch of the worldwide STA Travel is a reliable outlet for cheap international flights: 14th Floor, Wall Street Tower, 33 Thanon Suriwong ⓣ02 236 0262, ⓦwww.statravel.co.th. For Bangkok tour operators specializing in trips within Thailand see p.30.

Travel details

Trains

Bangkok Hualamphong Station to: Aranyaprathet (2 daily; 5–6hr); Butterworth (Malaysia; 1 daily; 21hr); Chumphon (11 daily; 6hr 45min–8hr 20min); Don Muang Airport (27 daily; 50min); Hua Hin (12 daily; 3–4hr); Nakhon Si Thammarat (2 daily; 15–16hr); Pattaya (1 daily; 3hr 45min); Phatthalung (5 daily; 12–15hr); Si Racha (1 daily; 3hr 15min); Surat Thani (11 daily; 9–12hr); Trang (2 daily; 15–16hr).

Thonburi (Bangkok Noi) Station to: Hua Hin (5 daily; 4hr–4hr 30min).

Buses

Eastern Bus Terminal to: Ban Phe (for Ko Samet; 12 daily; 3hr–3hr 30min); Chanthaburi (every 30min; 4–5hr); Pattaya (every 30min; 2hr 30min–3hr 30min); Rayong (every 40min; 2hr 30min–3hr); Si Racha (for Ko Si Chang; every 30min; 2–3hr); Trat (for Ko Chang; at least every 90min; 5–6hr).

Northern Bus Terminal to: Aranyaprathet (hourly; 4hr 30min); Chanthaburi (5 daily; 3–4hr); Chong Mek (daily; 11hr); Pattaya (every 30min; 2–3hr); Rayong (5 daily; 3hr); Si Racha (every 30min; 2hr); Trat (5 daily; 4–5hr).

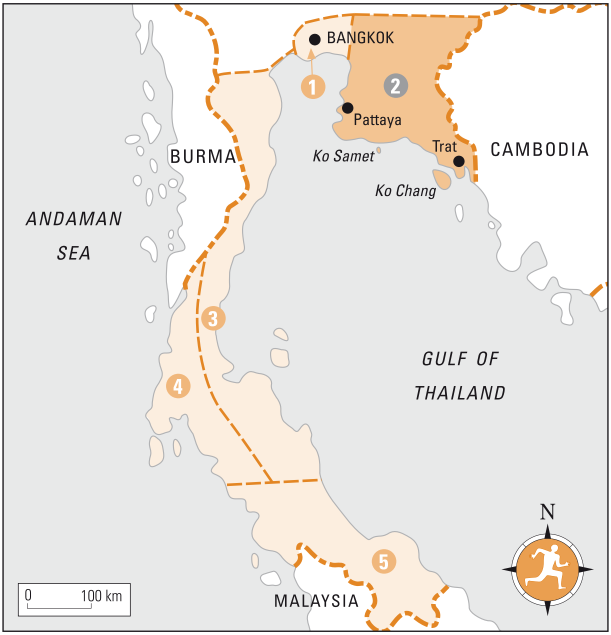
Southern Bus Terminal to: Cha-am (every 40min; 2hr 45min–3hr 15min); Chumphon (12 daily; 7–9hr); Hua Hin (every 40min; 3–4hr); Ko Samui (8 daily; 12–13hr); Krabi (8 daily; 12–14hr); Nakhon Si Thammarat (11 daily; 12hr); Phang Nga (3 daily; 11hr–12hr 30min); Phatthalung (4 daily; 13hr); Phetchaburi (every 30min; 2hr); Phuket (15 daily; 14–16hr); Prachuap Khiri Khan (every 30min; 4–5hr); Pranburi (every 40min; 3hr 30min); Ranong (6 daily; 9–10hr); Satun (2 daily; 16hr); Surat Thani (10 daily; 10–11hr); Takua Pa (10 daily; 12–13hr); Trang (6 daily; 12–14hr).

Flights

Bangkok to: Hua Hin (3 daily; 40min); Ko Samui (20 daily; 1hr–1hr 30min); Krabi (4 daily; 1hr 20min); Nakhon Si Thammarat (3–5 daily; 1hr 15min); Phuket (15 daily; 1hr 20min); Surat Thani (4 daily; 1hr 10min); Trang (1–2 daily; 1hr 30min); Trat (3 daily; 50min).

2

The east coast


BANGKOK
1
2
Pattaya
Ko Samet
Trat
CAMBODIA
Ko Chang
BURMA
ANDAMAN
SEA
3
4
GULF OF
THAILAND
5
MALAYSIA
0
100 km
N

CHAPTER 2

Highlights

- **Ko Si Chang** Tiny, barely touristed island with craggy coastlines, glorious views, and an appealingly laid-back ambience. **See p.198**
- **Ko Samet** Pretty (and popular) little island fringed with dazzlingly white beaches. **See p.215**
- **Trat** Welcoming guest houses and an atmospheric old quarter make for a worthwhile stopover. **See p.230**
- **Ko Chang** Head for Lonely Beach if you're in the mood to party, or to Hat Khlong Phrao for a more tranquil scene. **See p.235**
- **Ko Mak** Lovely, lazy, palm-filled little island with peaceful white-sand beaches. **See p.250**
- **Ko Kood** The real beauty in the Ko Chang archipelago – untamed and as yet largely undeveloped. **See p.253**

△ Hat Sai Kaew. Ko Samet

2

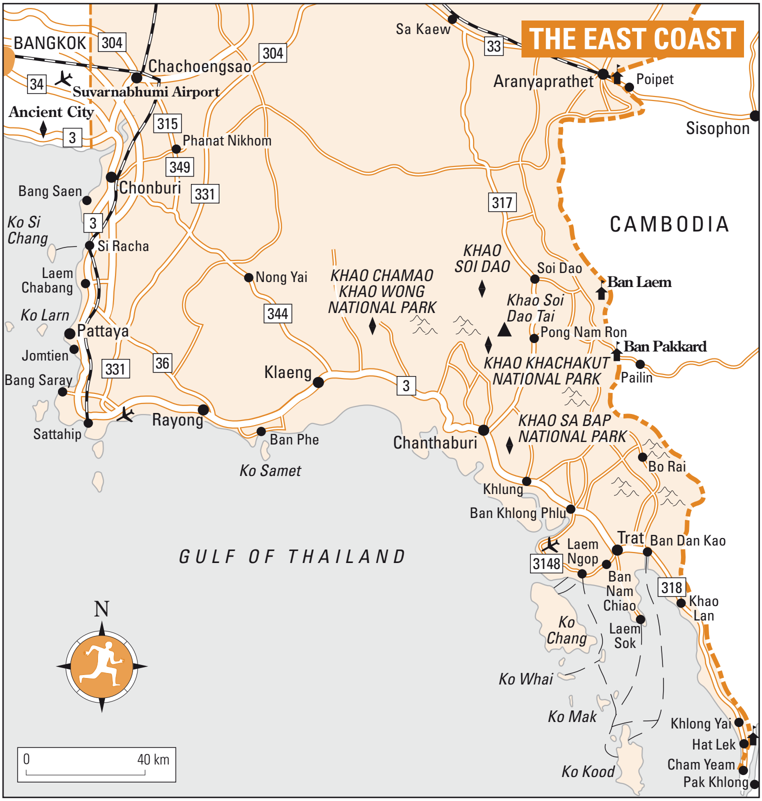
The east coast

Located within just a few hours' drive of the capital, the **east coast** resorts and islands attract a mixed crowd of weekending Bangkokians, pleasure-seeking expats and sybaritic tourists. Transport connections are good and, for overlanders, there are several Cambodian border crossings within easy reach. Beautiful beaches are not the whole picture, however, as the westernmost stretch of the east coast is also crucial to Thailand's industrial economy, its natural gas fields and deep-sea ports having spawned massive development along the first 200 kilometres of coastline, an area often dubbed the Eastern Seaboard. The initial landscape of refineries and depots shouldn't deter you though, as offshore it's an entirely different story, with island sands as glorious as many of those at the more celebrated southern retreats and enough peaceful havens to make it worth packing your hammock.

The first worthwhile stop comes 100km east of Bangkok at the town of **Si Racha**, which is the point of access for tiny **Ko Si Chang**, whose dramatically rugged coastlines and low-key atmosphere make it a restful haven. In complete contrast, nearby **Pattaya** is Thailand's number-one package-tour destination, its customers predominantly middle-aged Western and Chinese males enticed by the resort's sex-market reputation and undeterred by its lacklustre beach. Things soon look up, though, as the coast veers sharply eastwards towards Ban Phe, revealing the island of **Ko Samet**, the prettiest of all the beach resorts within comfortable bus-ride range of Bangkok.

East of Ban Phe, the landscape starts to get more lush and hilly as the coastal highway nears **Chanthaburi**, the dynamo of Thailand's gem trade and one of only two provincial capitals in the region worth visiting. The other is **Trat**, 68km further along the highway, and an important hub both for transport into **Cambodia** via Hat Lek – one of this region's two main border points, the other being Aranyaprathet – and for the islands of the Ko Chang archipelago. The star of this island group is large, forested **Ko Chang** itself, whose long, fine beaches have made it into Thailand's latest resort destination. A host of smaller, less-developed islands fill the sea between Ko Chang and the Cambodian coast, most notably the temptingly diverse trio of **Ko Whai**, **Ko Mak** and **Ko Kood**.

Highway 3 extends almost the entire length of the east coast – beginning in Bangkok as Thanon Sukhumvit, and known as such when it cuts through towns – and hundreds of **buses** ply the route, connecting all major mainland destinations. Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport is less than 50km from Si Racha, and there are two **airports** along the east coast itself: at U-Tapao naval base, midway between Pattaya and Rayong, which is served by Bangkok Airways flights to and from Ko Samui and Phuket; and just outside Trat, for Bangkok Airways flights to Bangkok and Ko Samui. Though a rail line connects Bangkok with Si Racha and Pattaya,


THE EAST COAST
BANGKOK
304
34
Suvarnabhumi Airport
Chachoengsao
304
Sa Kaew
33
Aranyaprathet
Poipet
Sisophon
Ancient City
3
315
Phanat Nikhom
349
331
Bang Saen
Chonburi
Ko Si Chang
3
Si Racha
Laem Chabang
Ko Larn
Pattaya
Jomtien
Bang Saray
Sattahip
331
36
Rayong
Nong Yai
344
Klaeng
3
Ban Phe
Ko Samet
KHAO CHAMAO KHAO WONG NATIONAL PARK
317
KHAO SOI DAO
Soi Dao
Khao Soi Dao Tai
Pong Nam Ron
CAMBODIA
Ban Laem
Ban Pakkard
Pailin
KHAO KHACHAKUT NATIONAL PARK
KHAO SA BAP NATIONAL PARK
Chanthaburi
Bo Rai
Khlung
Ban Khlong Phlu
Trat
Ban Dan Kao
Laem Ngop
3148
Ban Nam Chiao
318
Khao Lan
Ko Chang
Laem Sok
Ko Whai
Ko Mak
Ko Kood
Khlong Yai
Hat Lek
Cham Yeam
Pak Khlong
GULF OF THAILAND
N
0
40 km

it is served by just one slow **train** a day in each direction; a branch line makes two journeys a day to Aranyaprathet near the Cambodian border.

Si Racha and Ko Si Chang

Almost 30km southeast of Bangkok, Highway 3 finally emerges from the urban sprawl at the fishing town of Samut Prakan, location of the impressive Muang Boran Ancient City open-air museum, described on p.160. It then continues via the provincial capital of **Chonburi**, whose only real attraction is its annual October bout of buffalo-racing, before reaching **Si Racha**, departure point for the island of **Ko Si Chang**.

Si Racha

Access to Ko Si Chang is from the fishing port and refinery town of **SI RACHA** (also sometimes spelt Sriracha), famous throughout Thailand as the home of *nam phrik Si Racha*, the orange-coloured, chilli-laced ketchup found on every restaurant and kitchen table in the country. You'll probably only find yourself staying here if you miss the last boat to the island, though the town is not without charm, especially at twilight, when the brightly painted fishing boats load up with ice and nets before setting off into the night. The "island temple" of **Wat Ko Loi**, at the end of the very long causeway 400m north of the Ko Si Chang pier, is the main sight in town.

Arrival and orientation

Buses to Si Racha leave frequently from both Bangkok's Eastern (Ekamai) Bus Terminal and the Northern (Mo Chit) Bus Terminal. Air-conditioned buses stop at various points along Thanon Sukhumvit in Si Racha's town centre; easiest landmarks for alighting are the huge Robinsons/Pacific Park shopping centre in the northern part of town, from where it's about 1km to the Ko Si Chang pier (B40 by tuk-tuk), or, about 300m further south, the sign for high-rise *The City Hotel*. Across from here you should follow Thanon Surasakdi 1 (signed in English as Thanon Surasak) west to Thanon Chermchompon, and then south and almost immediately west again for the pier (about 10 minutes' walk in all). A few ordinary buses stop nearer the waterfront, on Thanon Chermchompon, close to the pier. There are also direct buses between Si Racha and Rayong (for Ban Phe and Ko Samet), Pattaya, and Trat (for Ko Chang): when moving on from Si Racha, all these buses can be flagged down at the above alighting points. White songthaews from Naklua, the northern suburb of Pattaya, run about twice an hour to Si Racha, dropping passengers near the clocktower, 200m south of the Si Racha pier soi. The one slow **train** a day from Bangkok – departing the capital at 6.55am – arrives at the **train station** on the eastern edge of the town, from where tuk-tuks are your easiest option for getting to the pier.

Most points of importance in Si Racha lie along either the main highway (Highway 3), **Thanon Sukhumvit**, which runs north-south along the eastern edge of the town centre, or its parallel artery, **Thanon Chermchompon** (also spelt **Thanon Jermjompol**). The **Ko Si Chang pier** is located at the end of Thanon Chermchompon's Soi 14, and signed off Thanon Chermchompon; the landmark **clocktower** and market are 200m south of Soi 14 and mark the southern edge of the town centre.

Accommodation and eating

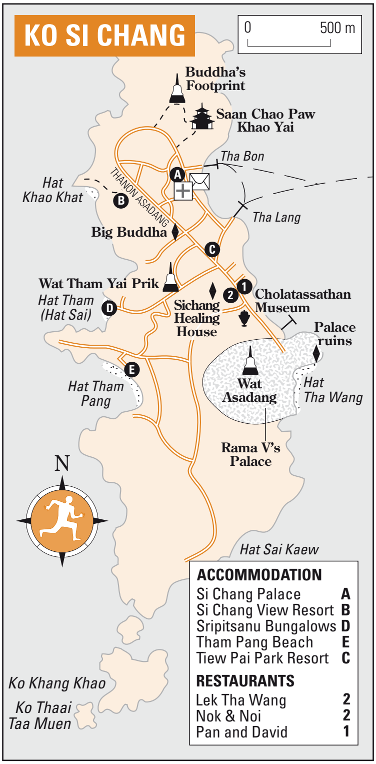
Strung out along wooden jetties shooting off into the sea west of Thanon Chermchompon are the simple, cabin-like rooms of several waterfront **hotels**, the best of which is *Sri Wattana* (Ⓣ038 311037; ②), with a range of basic en-suite fan rooms and a pleasant sea-view terrace; it's on Soi Sri Wattana, directly across Thanon Chermchompon from Thanon Si Racha Nakhon 3, a few metres' walk to the left of the mouth of the Ko Si Chang pier. For flashier, air-con digs, head for the eleven-storey *The City Hotel* (Ⓣ038 322700, Ⓦwww.citysriracha.com; ⑦–⑧), near one of the bus drops at 6/126 Thanon Sukhumvit, where all rooms are large, comfortable and air-conditioned and there's a pool, fitness centre and several restaurants. For **eating**, *Jarin* (unsigned in English) on the Ko Si Chang pier is the obvious place to eat while you're waiting for a boat – its food is cheap and includes seafood curry and seafood fried rice. Elsewhere, Thanon Si Racha Nakhon 3 is a good place to browse, lined with restaurants and night-time foodstalls, or there's an official night-market by the day-market and clocktower further south down Thanon Chermchompon. Picha Bakery, just off Thanon Chermchompon on the corner of Thanon Surasakdi 1 (Thanon Surasak), is also good for snacks. The poshest seafood place in town is the rather elegant *Grand Seaside*, which occupies a contemporarily styled jetty restaurant at the end of Soi 18, Thanon Chermchompon, 100m south of the Ko Si Chang pier soi, or 100m north of the clocktower, and has large picture windows over the water. It serves a long menu of fish and seafood such as crab with chilli, and cottonfish with green mango sauce (B125–225), and also does iced coffees.

Ko Si Chang

The unhurried pace and the absence of consumer pressures make tiny, rocky **KO SI CHANG** an engaging place to hang out for a few days. Unlike most other east-coast destinations, it offers no real beach life – though the water can be beautifully clear and there are opportunities to dive and snorkel – and there's little to do here but explore the craggy coastline by kayak or ramble up and down its steep contours on foot or by motorbike. The island is famous as the location of one of Rama V's summer palaces, parts of which have been prettily restored, and for its rare white squirrels, who live in the wooded patches inland.

Arrival and information

Ferries to Ko Si Chang leave from the pier at the end of Si Racha's (unsigned) Soi 14, off Thanon Chermchompon, and run approximately hourly from 7am to 8pm (45min; B40). On **arrival**, you might dock at either one of Ko Si Chang's two piers, Tha Bon or Tha Lang, but in either case you will be met by samlors who charge B40 to most guest houses, or B80 to Hat Tham Pang; samlor drivers are paid commission by some guest houses and restaurants, so treat any disparaging remarks about your intended destination with caution. The first boat back to the mainland leaves Tha Lang at 6am and the last at 6pm – the same boats depart Tha Bon about fifteen minutes earlier. There's also a **speedboat** service (B1000 per boat; 15min) available from both Si Racha and Ko Si Chang, in theory round the clock: phone to request it on ☎038 216084.


KO SI CHANG
0
500 m
Buddha's Footprint
Saan Chao Paw Khao Yai
Tha Bon
Hat Khao Khat
THANON ASADANG
Tha Lang
Si Racha
Big Buddha
Wat Tham Yai Prik
Hat Tham (Hat Sai)
Sichang Healing House
Cholatassathan Museum
Palace ruins
Hat Tham Pang
Wat Asadang
Hat Tha Wang
Rama V's Palace
N
Hat Sai Kaew
Ko Khang Khao
Ko Thaai Taa Muen
A
B
C
D
E
1
2
ACCOMMODATION
Si Chang Palace A
Si Chang View Resort B
Sripitsanu Bungalows D
Tham Pang Beach E
Tiew Pai Park Resort C
RESTAURANTS
Lek Tha Wang 2
Nok & Noi 2
Pan and David 1

Both piers connect with Thanon Asadang, a small ring road on which you'll find the market, shops and most of the island's houses. Much of the rest of the island is accessible only by paths and tracks. In town it's easy enough to walk from place to place, but to really enjoy what Ko Si Chang has to offer you'll need to either rent a **motorbike** – from *Tiew Pai Park Resort*, *Tham Pang Beach* or *Sripitsanu Bungalows*; B250–300/24hr – or psych yourself up for some challenging uphill cycling: **bicycles** can be rented through *Pan and David Restaurant* for B150/day. A popular alternative is to charter one of the island's trademark bizarrely elongated 1200cc motorbike **samlors** for the day. As there are hardly any private cars on Ko Si Chang, these contraptions virtually monopolize the roads, and a tour of the island will only set you back around B250, including time on one of the beaches or at a restaurant; some of the drivers speak good English and staff at any guest house or restaurant can contact one for you.

There are **exchange facilities** and an ATM at the bank between the two piers; the hospital is also near Tha Bon. For a fee of B50, non-guests can use the **swimming pool** at *Si Chang Palace* hotel. The exceptionally charming Sichang Healing House (daily except Wed 9am–6pm; ⓣ038 216467, ⓦspa.ko-sichang.com) offers various **spa**, massage and herbal-healing treatments (from B500 for a 90-minute massage) at its stylishly designed little garden retreat; to get there follow the signs inland off the road to the old palace. Healing House also sells postcards of watercolour views of Ko Si Chang. For **information** on Ko Si Chang look for the locally produced brochure *Island Welcome*, available from some hotels and restaurants, which offers a good overview of the island's attractions and carries adverts for accommodation; the website ⓦwww.ko-sichang.com is another useful resource, as is its compiler, David, who can be found at *Pan and David Restaurant*.

Ko Si Chang celebrates three particularly interesting **festivals** which would be worth making a special effort to witness, but they're popular events so book accommodation in advance. **Songkhran** is celebrated here on April 17–19 with sandcastle-building, greasy-pole-climbing and a very special exorcism ritual for the spirits of those islanders who suffered an unpleasant death during the previous year. At **Visakha Puja**, the full-moon day in May when Buddha's birth, death and enlightenment are honoured, islanders process to the old palace with their own hand-crafted Chinese lanterns, candlelit. And on September 20, Ko Si Chang marks its royal patron **King Chulalongkorn's birthday** with a *son et lumière* in the palace grounds and a beauty contest staged entirely in costumes from the Chulalongkorn era.

Accommodation

West-coast **accommodation** enjoys the best views, while Thanon Asadang and east-coast options are more convenient for restaurants and shops. Booking ahead is advisable for weekends and public holidays. For the very finest sea views, nothing can beat **camping** on your chosen spot: the cliffs at Hat Khao Khat are a particularly popular site, though quite exposed. You can rent tents for B100 from Uncle Juk on Hat Tham Pang (ⓣ081 822 5540), but phone ahead to reserve one for weekends.

Si Chang Palace Across from Tha Bon on Thanon Asadang ⓣ038 216276, ⓕ038 216030. The most upmarket place on the island and rather ostentatious, but facilities include a pool, and all rooms have air-con and TV. Price depends on whether or not you want a sea view. ⑥–⑦

Si Chang View Resort Hat Khao Khat ⓣ038 216210, ⓔjiyakiat@hotmail.com. Attractive fan and air-con accommodation in a pretty tropical garden set in a prime cliffside spot on the west coast, though sadly you can't see the rugged coastline clearly from the rooms. The air-con rooms are of a particularly high standard and there's a good restaurant here too. Fan ④, air-con ⑤–⑥

Sripitsanu Bungalows Hat Tham ⓣ038 216336. From Tha Lang walk to *Tiew Pai,* cross Thanon Asadang and walk a few metres to the left, then take the first right, a narrow (unsigned) road heading uphill; follow this road up past the monastery Wat Tham Yai Prik, continuing straight ahead at the monastery junction; *Sripitsanu* is ten minutes' walk from *Tiew Pai*. Stunningly located place whose dozen large, if rather haphazardly maintained, fan and air-con rooms and bungalows sit almost right at the edge of the cliff – some are actually built into the rockface. It's a gorgeous spot, with unsurpassed views and the possibility of swimming at low tide, though the place is in need of some serious TLC, and there's not much English spoken. Some bungalows have their own cooking facilities. Rooms ④, bungalows ⑤

Tham Pang Beach Hat Tham Pang ⓣ038 216153, ⓕ038 216122. The busiest west-coast accommodation, whose twenty fairly rudimentary concrete bungalows – all with bathroom, fan, veranda and partial sea view – are stacked in tiers up the cliffside behind the eponymous strand, Ko Si Chang's only real beach. There's a restaurant here, too, and beach equipment for hire. ③

Tiew Pai Park Resort Thanon Asadang ⓣ038 216084, ⓦwww.tiewpai.com. Very central and good value, and most backpackers' first choice. Bungalows are set in a wooded garden and include very good fan, en-suite bungalows (with TV and fridge); some slightly cheaper, simpler versions; plus deluxe air-con bungalows with separate living quarters and/or connecting rooms. Fan ③, air-con ④–⑤

Around the island

The main sights on the island are **Rama V's old palace** on the southeast coast and the popular Chinese pilgrimage temple **Saan Chao Paw Khao Yai** on the northeastern tip, with west-coast **Hat Tham Pang** the main beach. There's reasonable **diving** off diminutive **Ko Thaai Taa Muen**, an islet to the south of Ko Si Chang, best explored on a dive trip arranged through *Pan and David Restaurant* (B2500 including equipment and three tanks; minimum five people; book two days ahead). **Fishing** boats with a skipper can be chartered from the two Ko Si Chang piers for B1500 per day, or *Tiew Pai Park Resort* does half-day fishing trips with tackle, snorkelling gear and food for B2500 per ten-person boat.

Rama V's Palace and around

The most famous sight on the island is the partially ruined Rama V's Palace, which occupies a large chunk of gently sloping land midway down the east coast, behind pebbly **Hat Tha Wang**. It's an enjoyable place to explore and can be reached on foot from *Tiew Pai Park Resort* in about half an hour. En route, shortly before you reach the palace grounds, you'll pass the small and less than riveting **Cholatassathan Museum** (Tues–Sun 9am–5pm; entry by donation), established by the resident Aquatic Resources Research Institute to provide an introduction to the coral and marine life around Ko Si Chang.

Built in the 1890s as a sort of health resort where sickly members of the royal family could recuperate in peace, **Rama V's Palace**, or Phra Judhadhut Ratchathan (daily 9am–5pm; free), formed the heart of a grand and extensive complex comprising homes for royal advisers, chalets for convalescents, quarters for royal concubines and administrative buildings. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, Rama V (King Chulalongkorn) had lost interest in his island project and so in 1901 his golden teak palace was moved piece by piece to Bangkok, and reconstructed there as Vimanmek Palace; its foundations are still visible just south of the palace's Saphan Asadang pier.

Following recent renovations, the elegant design of the **palace grounds** is apparent once more. It fans out around an elaborate labyrinth of fifty interlinked ponds, shaded by a semi-wild landscape of frangipani bushes and tropical shrubs – home to lots of millipedes and the odd snake – and connected via a maze of stone steps and balustrades that still cling to the shallow hillside. Close to the shore, four of the original Western-style **villas** have been reconstructed to house displays – of varying interest – on Chulalongkorn's relationship with Ko Si Chang; one of them also doubles as a coffee shop. There's enough to keep you ambling around here for a couple of hours, with signs directing you up the hillside to the palace's unusual whitewashed shrine, **Wat Asadang**, whose circular walls are punctuated with Gothic stained-glass windows and surmounted by a chedi. Beyond Wat Asadang

△ Wat Asadang, Rama V's Palace, Ko Si Chang

a path leads you to a viewpoint, though there's little point following the signs for the information office beyond that as it's unstaffed.

Hat Tham Pang and around

The main beach on the west coast, and the most popular one on the island, is **Hat Tham Pang**, a B80 samlor ride from either pier. The kilometre-long stretch of sand here is lined with deckchairs and beach umbrellas and you can rent kayaks (B300/hour), inner tubes, snorkels (B100/hour) and fishing rods from Uncle Juk's watersports stall. The best **snorkelling** spots are further south, around the tiny islands off Ko Si Chang's southern tip, particularly off the north coast of **Ko Khang Khao** – forty minutes by kayak from Hat Tham Pang.

North of Hat Tham Pang, and also accessible via a fork off Thanon Asadang opposite *Tiew Pai* (a ten-minute walk), you'll find the **Wat Tham Yai Prik** temple and meditation centre, which is open to interested visitors and holds frequent retreats. Unusually, nuns as well as monks here wear brown (rather than white) and everyone participates in the upkeep of the monastery: you can see some of the fruits of their labour in the extensive roadside orchard. Just west of the wat, the dramatically situated *Sripitsanu Bungalows* offer glorious views over the pretty, rocky cove known as **Hat Tham** or **Hat Sai**, which is only really swimmable at low tide.

North to Saan Chao Paw Khao Yai

Back down on the ring road, continuing in a northwesterly direction, you'll pass beneath the gaze of a huge yellow Buddha before reaching the rocky northwest headland of **Khao Khat**, a few hundred metres further along Thanon Asadang. The uninterrupted panorama of open sea makes this a classic sunset spot, and there's a path along the cliffside.

From here the road heads east to reach the gaudy, multi-tiered Chinese temple, **Saan Chao Paw Khao Yai** (Shrine of the Father Spirit of the Great Hill), stationed at the top of a steep flight of steps and commanding a good view of the harbour and the mainland coast. Established here long before Rama V arrived on the island, the shrine was dedicated by Chinese seamen who saw a strange light coming out of one of the **caves** behind the modern-day temple. The caves, now full of religious statues and related paraphernalia, are visited by boatloads of Chinese pilgrims, particularly over Chinese New Year. Continue on up the cliffside to reach the small pagoda built for Rama V and enshrining a **Buddha's Footprint**. Two very long, very steep flights of stairs give access to the footprint: the easternmost one starts at the main waterfront entrance to the Chinese temple and takes you past a cluster of monks' meditation cells, while the westerly one rises further west along the ring road and offers the finest lookouts. It's well worth the vertiginous ascent, not least for the views out over Thailand's east coast; looking down you'll see a congestion of river barges bringing tonnes of rice, sugar and tapioca flour from the Central Plains to the international cargo boats anchored off Ko Si Chang's lee shore, and behind them, the tiny island of Ko Khram.

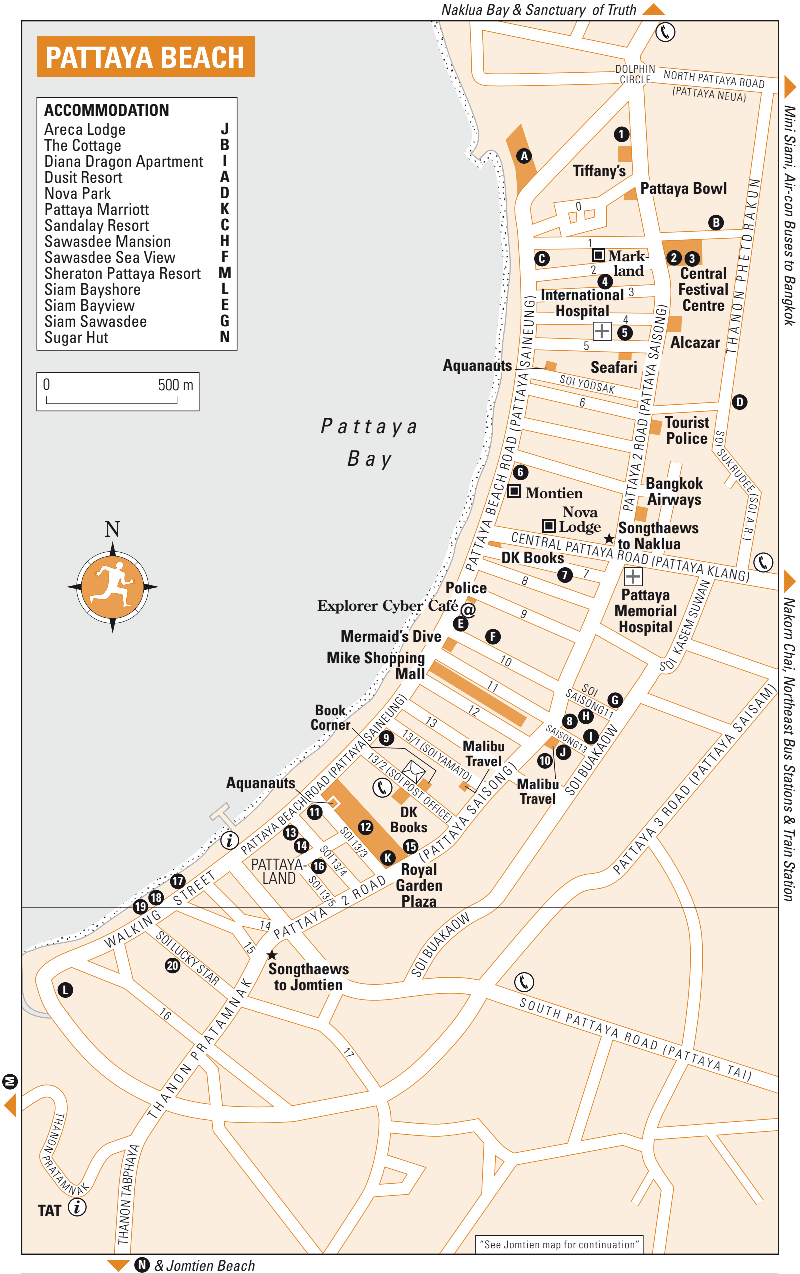
Eating and drinking

One of the most enjoyable **places to eat** on the island is *Pan and David Restaurant* (closed Tues) on the east-coast road, 200m before the entrance to the old palace grounds, which is run by a sociable and well-informed American expat and his Thai wife. The long and delicious menu includes authentically fiery *som tam*, home-made fettuccine with black olives (B125), fillet steak (B245), Thai curries, a good vegetarian selection, brownies and home-made fresh strawberry ice cream (B55), as well as very good-value Italian wine (from B65/glass). Other good options include *Nok and Noi,* across the road from *Pan and David*, and the locally famous *Lek Tha Wang*, slightly further down the road towards the palace, both of which are known for their seafood. *Tiew Pai* serves travellers' food, and *Si Chang View Resort*'s speciality is its seafood served in one of several clifftop pavilions, especially popular at sunset, though be prepared for slow service and a fairly hefty bill; they do fresh coffee too.

Pattaya

With its streets full of high-rise hotels and touts on every corner, **PATTAYA** is the epitome of exploitative tourism gone mad, but most of Pattaya's two million

PATTAYA BEACH


Naklua Bay & Sanctuary of Truth
Mini Siam, Air-con Buses to Bangkok
Nakorn Chai, Northeast Bus Stations & Train Station
N & Jomtien Beach
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Pattaya Bay
DOLPHIN CIRCLE
NORTH PATTAYA ROAD (PATTAYA NEUA)
THANON PHETDRAKUN
PATTAYA BEACH ROAD (PATTAYA SAINEUNG)
PATTAYA 2 ROAD (PATTAYA SAISONG)
CENTRAL PATTAYA ROAD (PATTAYA KLANG)
SOUTH PATTAYA ROAD (PATTAYA TAI)
PATTAYA 3 ROAD (PATTAYA SAISAM)
SOI YODSAK
SOI SUKRUDEE (SOI A.R.)
SOI KASEM SUWAN
SOI BUAKAOW
SOI SAISONG 11
SAISONG 13
13/1 (SOI YAMATO)
13/2 (SOI POST OFFICE)
SOI 13/3
SOI 13/4
SOI 13/5
SOI LUCKY STAR
WALKING STREET
THANON PRATAMNAK
THANON TABPHAYA
Tiffany's
Pattaya Bowl
Markland
International Hospital
Central Festival Centre
Alcazar
Aquanauts
Seafari
Tourist Police
Bangkok Airways
Montien
Nova Lodge
Songthaews to Naklua
DK Books
Pattaya Memorial Hospital
Police
Explorer Cyber Café
Mermaid's Dive
Mike Shopping Mall
Book Corner
Malibu Travel
DK Books
Royal Garden Plaza
PATTAYA-LAND
Songthaews to Jomtien
TAT
"See Jomtien map for continuation"

ACCOMMODATION	
Areca Lodge	J
The Cottage	B
Diana Dragon Apartment	I
Dusit Resort	A
Nova Park	D
Pattaya Marriott	K
Sandalay Resort	C
Sawasdee Mansion	H
Sawasdee Sea View	F
Sheraton Pattaya Resort	M
Siam Bayshore	L
Siam Bayview	E
Siam Sawasdee	G
Sugar Hut	N

RESTAURANTS, BARS & CLUBS	
Baywatch	11
Bighorn Steakhouse	10
The Blues Factory	20
Café New Orleans	14
Food Wave Seaview Food Court	12
Fuji	3
Green Bottle	8
Hard Rock Café	6
Heineken Beer Garden	2
Hopf Brew House	9
Jazz Pit	5
King Seafood	17
Kum Punn Pub	4
La Piola	1
Lucifer's	18
Marine Disco	19
PIC Kitchen	5
Pig and Whistle	7
Shamrock	16
Shenanigans	15
Sugar Hut	N
Tip's	13

annual visitors don’t mind that the place looks like the Costa del Sol because what they are here for is sex. The city swarms with male and female **prostitutes**, spiced up by a sizeable population of transvestites (*katoey*), and plane-loads of Western men flock here to enjoy their services in the rash of hostess bar-beers, go-go clubs and massage parlours for which “Patpong-on-Sea” is notorious. The ubiquitous signs trumpeting “Viagra for Sale” say it all. Pattaya also has the largest **gay scene** in Thailand, with several exclusively gay hotels and a whole area given over to gay sex bars.

Pattaya’s evolution into sin city began with the Vietnam War, when it got fat on selling sex to American servicemen. When the soldiers and sailors left in the mid-1970s, Western tourists were enticed to fill their places, and as the seaside Sodom and Gomorrah boomed, ex-servicemen returned to run the sort of joints they had once blown their dollars in. These days, almost half the bars and restaurants in Pattaya are Western-run. More recently, there has been an influx of criminal gangs from Germany, Russia and Japan, who reportedly find Pattaya a convenient centre for running their rackets in passport and credit-card fraud, as well as child pornography and prostitution; expat murders are a regular news item in the *Pattaya Mail*.

Meanwhile, local tourism authorities are trying hard to improve **Pattaya’s image**, and with surprising success have begun enticing families and older couples with a plethora of more wholesome entertainments such as theme parks, golf courses, shopping plazas and year-round diving, made even more palatable by a plentiful supply of mid-market package-holiday accommodation. There’s not a great deal for committed beach bums however, so anyone looking for beach huts, hammock bars and squeaky white sands is better off pushing on to nearby Ko Samet, an altogether more attractive option.

Arrival and information

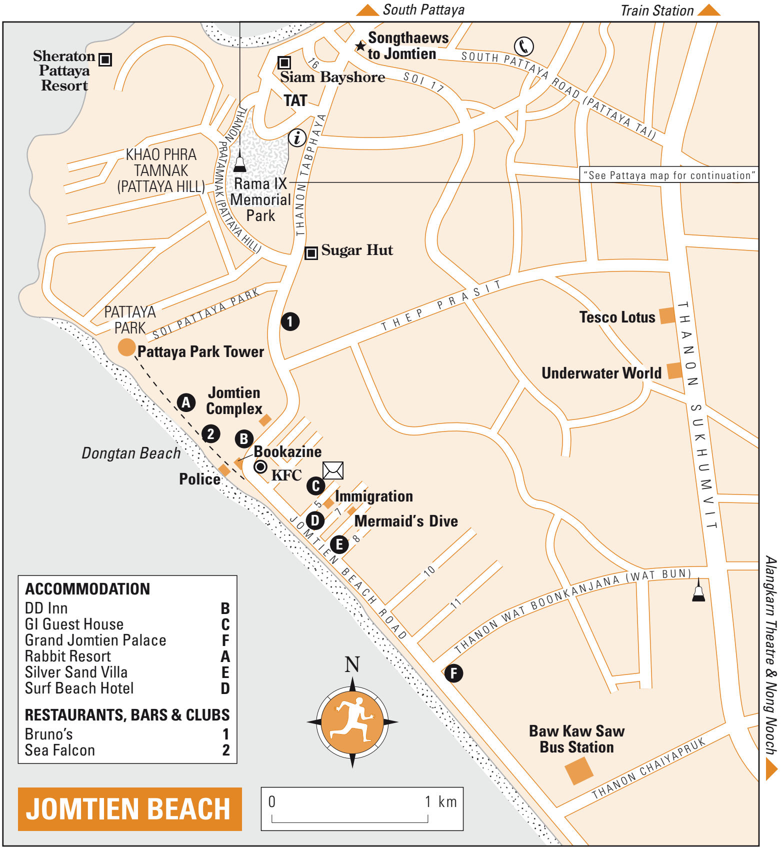
Most people **arrive** in Pattaya direct **from Bangkok**, either by public **bus** from the Eastern or Northern bus terminals, or by air-conditioned tour bus from a Bangkok hotel or the airport. Air-con buses to and from Bangkok bus terminals use the bus station on North Pattaya Road (Ⓣ038 429877), from where share-taxis charge about B40 per person for hotel transfers. Coming **from Si Racha**, **Rayong** or **Trat** you’ll probably get dropped by the roadside just east of the resort on Thanon Sukhumvit, from where songthaews will ferry you into town; if heading on to these towns, you need to pick up your bus from one of the *sala* on Thanon Sukhumvit. Non-air-con local buses use the Baw Khaw Saw government bus station on Thanon Chaiyapruk in Jomtien. Malibu Travel on Sainueng 13/1 and on Saisong 13 (Ⓣ038 427277, Ⓦwww.malibu-samet.com) offers a fast B180 **minibus service** between Pattaya and the Ban Phe pier (for Ko Samet), and between Pattaya and Ko Chang (B500 including ferry); tickets can be booked through most tour agents.

Pattaya is on a branch line of the eastern rail line, and there’s one slow **train** a day in each direction between the resort and Bangkok. Pattaya’s station (Ⓣ038 429285) is on Thanon Sukhumvit, about 500m north of the Central Pattaya Road intersection. Pattaya’s **U-Tapao airport** (Ⓣ038 245595) is located at the naval base near Sattahip, about 25km south of the resort, and runs Bangkok Airways flights to and from Ko Samui and Phuket. Bangkok’s new **Suvarnabhumi Airport** is less than 80km from Pattaya and is served by public bus #389 (B120), as well as by metered taxis (approx B1100) and limousines (B1500–2500). When returning, most hotels and tour agents sell seats in a shared minibus to Suvarnabhumi for B400.

A municipal **tourist service centre** (daily 8.30am–4.30pm) can be found on the beach at the mouth of Walking Street; the **TAT** office is inconveniently located at 609 Thanon Pratamnak (sometimes referred to as Cliff Road) between South Pattaya and Jomtien (daily 8.30am–4.30pm; ⓣ 038 428750, ⓔ tatchon@tat.or.th). The *Pattaya Mail* (ⓦ www.pattayamail.com) is one of several **local newspapers** that prints community news stories and entertainment listings; it comes out every Friday and is available at most newsstands and bookstores. Most hotels and many restaurants hand out free monthly what's-on magazines.

Orientation

Pattaya comprises three separate bays. At the centre is the four-kilometre **Pattaya Beach**, the noisiest, most unsightly zone of the resort, crowded with yachts and tour boats and fringed by a sliver of sand and a paved beachfront walkway. Signed as Pattaya Sainueng but known by its English name, **Pattaya Beach Road** runs the length of the beach and is connected to the parallel Pattaya 2 Road (Pattaya Saisong) by a string of sois numbered from 1 in the north to 17 in the south. The


South Pattaya
Train Station
Sheraton Pattaya Resort
Songthaews to Jomtien
Siam Bayshore
TAT
SOI 16
SOI 17
SOUTH PATTAYA ROAD (PATTAYA TAI)
KHAO PHRA TAMNAK (PATTAYA HILL)
THANON PRATAMNAK (PATTAYA HILL)
THANON TABPHAYA
Rama IX Memorial Park
"See Pattaya map for continuation"
Sugar Hut
THEP PRASIT
Tesco Lotus
Underwater World
THANON SUKHUMVIT
PATTAYA PARK
SOI PATTAYA PARK
Pattaya Park Tower
Jomtien Complex
Dongtan Beach
Bookazine
Police
KFC
Immigration
Mermaid's Dive
5
7
8
10
11
JOMTIEN BEACH ROAD
THANON WAT BOONKANJANA (WAT BUN)
Alangkarn Theatre & Nong Nooch
Baw Kaw Saw Bus Station
THANON CHAIYAPRUK
N
ACCOMMODATION
DD Inn B
GI Guest House C
Grand Jomtien Palace F
Rabbit Resort A
Silver Sand Villa E
Surf Beach Hotel D
RESTAURANTS, BARS & CLUBS
Bruno's 1
Sea Falcon 2
JOMTIEN BEACH
0
1 km

core of this block, between sois 6 and 13, is referred to as **Central Pattaya** (Pattaya Klang) and is packed with hotels, restaurants, bars, fast-food joints, souvenir shops and tour operators. During the day this is the busiest part of the resort, but after dark the neon zone south of Soi 13/2 – **South Pattaya** – takes over. Known locally as "the strip", this is what Pattaya is really about, with sex for sale in go-go bars, discos, massage parlours and open-sided bar-beers. The town's enclave of gay sex bars is here too, focused mainly on the interlinked network of small lanes known as **Pattayaland** sois 1, 2 and 3 (or Boyz Town), but actually signed as sois 13/3, 13/4 and 13/5, between the Royal Garden Plaza and Soi 14. Pattaya Beach Road continues south from its junction with South Pattaya Road (Thanon Pattaya Tai) all the way down to the *Siam Bayshore Hotel*; this stretch of road is also known as **Walking Street** because it's pedestrianized every evening from 7pm. **North Pattaya**, between Central Pattaya Road (Thanon Pattaya Klang) and North Pattaya Road (Thanon Hat Pattaya Neua), also has its bar-beers, but is a slightly calmer district.

The southerly bay, **Jomtien Beach** (sometimes spelt Chom Tian), is also fronted by enormous high-rises, many of which are condominiums, though there are some low-rise, mid-priced hotels along the beachfront road, Jomtien Beach Road (Thanon Hat Jomtien), as well. Fourteen kilometres long, it's considered Thailand's premier windsurfing spot. Though the atmosphere here is not as frantic as in Pattaya, Jomtien suffers from the same excess of bar-beers and shops peddling beachwear and tacky souvenirs and, like its neighbour, is also constantly under construction. The nicest stretch of sand is **Dongtan Beach**, beyond the northern end of the road: shady, and car-free between 10am and 5pm, it is Pattaya's main gay beach, though used by all. The bulge of land behind Dongtan Beach, separating Jomtien from Pattaya, is Khao Phra Tamnak, variously translated as **Pattaya Hill** or Buddha Hill, site of several posh hotels and the Pattaya Park water park and funfair.

Naklua Bay, around the northerly headland from Pattaya Beach, is the quietest of the three enclaves, and has managed to retain its fishing harbour and indigenous population despite the onslaught of condominiums, holiday apartments and expat homes. Most of the accommodation here is in time-share condos.

Transport

The easiest way to get around Pattaya is by **songthaew**, known locally as the baht bus – though on all routes beware of being overcharged. Most follow a standard anticlockwise route up Pattaya 2 Road as far as North Pattaya Road and back down Pattaya Beach Road, for a fixed fee of B10 per person (B5 for locals). Never jump in a parked songthaew, as you'll be charged for chartering the whole vehicle: just flag down one that's passing. Songthaews **to Jomtien** start from the junction of Pattaya 2 Road and South Pattaya Road and cost B10 to *KFC* or up to B30 to Thanon Wat Boonkanjana. Songthaews **to Naklua** head north from the junction of Pattaya 2 Road and Central Pattaya Road and cost B10 to Naklua Soi 12. There's also a new **air-con shuttle-bus** service operating around all three areas of the resort but it's pricey at B30 flat fare and not very frequent so may not last very long.

The alternative is to rent your own transport: Pattaya Beach Road is full of touts offering motorbikes and jeeps for rent. **Motorbike rental** costs from B200 to B700 per day depending on the bike's size; beware of faulty vehicles, and of scams – some people have reported that rented bikes get stolen from tourists by touts keen to keep the customer's deposit, so you may want to use your own lock. Avis **car rental** (Ⓦwww.avisthailand.com) have offices inside the *Dusit Resort* (Ⓣ038 361627) and the *Hard Rock Hotel* (Ⓣ038 428755) in North Pattaya, Budget

(ⓣ038 710717, ⓦwww.budget.co.th) has an office in Tipp Plaza on Beach Road, between sois 10 and 11, and many of the motorbike touts also rent out jeeps for about B1000 per day.

Accommodation

Really cheap **hotels** are almost impossible to find in Pattaya and Jomtien. Only a couple of the "inexpensive" hotels listed below have rooms for B250; the cheapest alternatives are often offered by the bars on the side sois (especially Soi 6, Sois 13/2, 13/3 and 13/4) who keep rooms upstairs (④), both for short-term customers and for anyone else who doesn't mind the noise. Hotels in the next category up generally offer air-con rooms at least and often a swimming pool as well; prices in all categories plummet by up to fifty percent whenever demand is slack. Advance reservations are advisable to stay in the best-value hotels.

Bear in mind that the sex industry ensures that all rooms have beds large enough for at least two people; rates quoted here are for "single" rooms with one big double bed (a "double" room will have two big double beds and cost more). Another effect of the sex industry is that hotel guests are often assumed to be untrustworthy, so when checking in you're likely to be asked for a deposit against the loss of your room key and against the use of your mini-bar and phone.

Pattaya

Inexpensive and moderate

Areca Lodge 198/21 Soi Saisong 13 (aka Soi Diana Inn), Central Pattaya ⓣ038 410123, ⓦwww.arecalodge.com. Unusually stylish place for Pattaya, with pleasantly furnished air-con rooms in two wings built around two swimming pools, all of them with balconies. ⑥–⑦

The Cottage Off Pattaya 2 Rd, North Pattaya ⓣ038 425650, ⓔthe_cottage2002@yahoo.com. Good-value, well-appointed brick bungalows, all with air-con, pleasantly located in a pretty garden compound a good distance off the main road. Convenient for the shops and restaurants in the Central Festival Centre complex. Facilities include two small swimming pools, a bar and a restaurant. ⑤

Diana Dragon Apartment 198/16 Soi Saisong 13 (aka Soi Diana Inn), Central Pattaya ⓣ038 423928, ⓦwww.dianapattaya.co.th. Enormous, low-budget fan and air-con rooms with fridge, and use of the pool at *Diana Inn*, 100m away; favoured by long-stay tourists. Fan ③, air-con ④

Nova Park Soi Sukrudee (aka Soi AR), off Thanon Phetdrakun, North Pattaya ⓣ038 415304, ⓦwww.novaparkpattaya.com. Plush, good-value serviced apartments with a pool on site and free ADSL Internet access and VCDs in every room. ⑦

Sandalay Resort Between sois 1 and 2, Pattaya Beach Rd, North Pattaya ⓣ038 422660, ⓦwww.sandalayresort.com. This medium-sized high-rise just across the road from the beach stands out because of its contemporary-style furnishings, giving it an unusually modish feel for a resort where image is rarely a priority. Standard rooms are small but well designed and deluxe versions are impressively big: both options are available with sea view and tiny balcony at extra cost. All rooms have air-con and TV and there's a swimming pool. ⑧–⑨

Sawasdee Mansion 502/1 Saisong 11 (aka Soi Honey Inn), Pattaya 2 Rd, Central Pattaya ⓣ038 425360, ⓦwww.sawasdee-hotels.com. The cheapest branch of the ubiquitous Sawasdee chain of budget hotels has some of the most inexpensive rooms in Pattaya and is friendlier than many. Rooms are shabby and spartan – and many have no external window – but are available with fan or air-con and there's a restaurant downstairs. Fan ②, air-con ③

Sawasdee Sea View 302/1 Soi 10, Central Pattaya ⓣ038 710566, ⓦwww.sawasdee-hotels.com. Occupying a great location in a still fairly quiet soi just a few dozen metres off the beachfront road, this place offers large and quite trendily decorated rooms, all with air-con and TV but none enjoying a real sea view. ⑤

Siam Sawasdee Corner of Soi Saisong 11 and Soi Buakaow, Central Pattaya ⓣ038 720330, ⓦwww.sawasdee-hotels.com. The swimming pool is the attraction here and draws a fairly rowdy crowd: the 206 rooms are on the scruffy side but all come with air-con, TV and fridge. ⑤

Expensive

Dusit Resort 240/2 Pattaya Beach Road ⓣ038 425611, ⓦwww.dusit.com. This is one of only a few Beach Road hotels (the others are at the southern end) to be actually on the beach, so many rooms have direct sea views – worth paying the extra for as some offer impressive panoramas of the whole bay – as do both swimming pools. Good facilities include spa, fitness club and several restaurants, and rooms are standard deluxe. ⑨

Pattaya Marriott 218 Pattaya Beach Rd, Central Pattaya ⓣ038 412120, ⓦwww.marriotthotels.com/pyxmc. Located right in the heart of the resort and across the road from the beach, but pleasingly secluded within a tropical garden, this well-equipped hotel has very comfortable top-notch rooms, a huge pool, a spa, floodlit tennis courts, mountain-bike rental and a kids' club. ⑨

Sheraton Pattaya Resort 437 Thanon Pratamnak (Cliff Rd), South Pattaya ⓣ038 259888, ⓦwww.starwoodhotels.com. Pattaya's best hotel is smaller and more intimate than most in its class and offers five-star rooms in its two hotel wings as well as in private pavilions. The beautiful series of freeform swimming pools is set within lush gardens – compensating for the minuscule private beach – and there's a spa and three restaurants, though it's built on a hill so be prepared for lots of steps, and you'll need transport to get to the shops and restaurants of downtown Pattaya. ⑨

Siam Bayshore 559 Pattaya Beach Rd ⓣ038 428678, ⓦwww.siamhotels.com. At the far southern end of the South Pattaya strip, overlooking the beach, this popular hotel comprises 270 rooms spread over twelve wings and is set in exceptionally lush tropical gardens. Many rooms have balconies offering uninterrupted sea views, and there are two pools as well as tennis courts and snooker, table-tennis and badminton facilities. ⑧

Siam Bayview Pattaya Beach Rd, on the corner of Soi 10, Central Pattaya ⓣ038 423871, ⓦwww.siamhotels.com. Large, very centrally located and well-priced 350-room hotel that has smart, good-sized rooms, many of them with sea views. Good value considering its location and facilities, which include two swimming pools, tennis courts, snooker and several restaurants. ⑧–⑨

Sugar Hut 391/18 Thanon Tabphaya, midway between South Pattaya and Jomtien ⓣ038 251686, ⓦwww.sugar-hut.com. The most characterful accommodation in Pattaya comprises a charming collection of 33 Ayutthaya-style traditional wooden bungalows set in a fabulously lush garden with three swimming pools. The bungalows are in tropical-chic style, with low beds, open-roofed shower rooms, mosquito nets and private verandas; the more expensive ones have a sitting room as well. You'll need your own transport as it's nowhere near the restaurants, shops or sea. ⑨

Jomtien Beach

DD Inn Just back from the beach, on a tiny soi opposite *KFC* at the far north end of Beach Rd ⓣ038 232995, ⓔddinn@hotmail.com. Friendly, good-value guest-house-style little hotel in an ideal spot just a few metres from the beach. Rooms with balconies are slightly pricier, but all rooms come with air-con and TV. ③–④

GI Guest House 75/14 Soi 5 (Soi Post Office), off Beach Rd ⓣ038 231581, ⓔgitravel@gmail.com. Small but cheap rooms in this little, Bangkok-style guest house. All rooms have TV and hot water; you pay more for air-con. Fan ②, air-con ③

Grand Jomtien Palace 365 Beach Rd, at the corner of Thanon Wat Boonkanjana (aka Wat Bun) ⓣ038 231405, ⓦwww.grandjomtienpalace.com. Welcoming, mid-market, package-oriented fourteen-storey hotel where many of the comfortable, air-con rooms have a decent sea view and even the cheapest have partial sight of the water. Facilities include three swimming pools, a beer garden and restaurant, and a small shopping arcade. ⑦

Rabbit Resort Dongtan beachfront, 400m north up the beach from Thep Prasit/Beach Road junction ⓣ038 303303, ⓦwww.rabbitresort.com. Beautiful place that's the most appealing option in Jomtien, and located on the nicest stretch of beach, the predominantly but not exclusively gay Dongtan Beach. Comprising mainly teakwood cottages, elegantly furnished with Thai fabrics, artworks and antiques and many with garden-style bathrooms, plus some "forest rooms" in a two-storey block, all of them set around a tropical garden just a few metres off the beach. ⑨

Silver Sand Villa Next to Soi White House at the northern end of Beach Rd ⓣ038 231288, ⓦwww.silversandvilla.com. The huge, nicely furnished air-con rooms in the old wing here are good value (and most are wheelchair-accessible), but you need to book ahead to be sure of a pool view rather than a wall view. Rooms in the new wing are more expensive and, though plainly furnished, they all have balconies and pool views. The hotel also has two swimming pools and a restaurant. Old wing ⑤, new wing ⑥

Surf Beach Hotel Between sois 5 and 7 at the north end of Beach Rd ⓣ038 231025,

Ⓕ038 231029. Popular mid-range place across from the beach. Rooms are old-fashioned and a bit faded, but all have air-con and TV, and some have a sea view. ⑤

The resort

Most tourists in Pattaya spend the days recovering from the night before: not much happens before midday, breakfasts are served until early afternoon, and the hotel pool generally seems more inviting than a tussle with water-skis. But the energetic are well catered for, with a decent range of dive centres, watersports facilities, golf courses and theme parks.

Snorkelling and scuba-diving

Snorkelling and scuba-diving are popular in Pattaya, though if you've got the choice between diving here or off the Andaman coast, go for the latter – the reefs there are a lot more spectacular. The big advantage of Pattaya is that it can be dived year-round, and underwater visibility is consistent. The main destinations for local **dive trips** are the group of "outer islands" about 25km from shore, which include Ko Rin, Ko Man Wichai and Ko Klung Badaan, where you have a good chance of seeing big schools of barracuda, jacks and tuna, as well as moray eels, blue-spotted stingrays, and hawksbill and green turtles. There are also three rewarding wreck dives in the Samae San/Sattahip area: the 21-metre-deep freighter *Phetchaburi Bremen*, which went down in the 1930s; the 64-metre-long cargo ship *Hardeep*, which was sunk during World War II and can be navigated along the entire length of its interior; and the HMS *Khram*, which was sunk deliberately by the Thai navy in 2003 to make a new artificial reef. A one-day dive trip with a reputable dive company, including two dives, equipment and lunch, generally costs around B3000, with accompanying snorkellers paying B800. Several companies along Pattaya Beach Road run **snorkelling** trips to nearby Ko Larn and Bamboo Island (B1500), though mass tourism has taken its toll on these two islands and their coral.

Pattaya is also an easy place to learn to dive: with the good dive companies, one-day Discover Scuba Diving courses start at about B4000, and four-day Open-water **courses** average B14,000. Be careful when signing up for a dive course or expedition: unqualified instructors and dodgy equipment are a fact of life in Pattaya, especially at those outfits offering cheap deals, and it's as well to question other divers about all operators, PADI-certified or not (see p.57 of Basics for more guidelines and for advice on dive insurance). See "Hospitals" on p.214 for details of recompression chambers in the Pattaya area. The following are well-respected **dive shops** that run diving expeditions and internationally certificated courses; both also offer technical diving (down to 85m in the Samae San area), and long-term instructor training/career-development courses (up to six months), and both sell imported dive gear.

Aquanauts Soi Yodsak (Soi 6), Central Pattaya Ⓣ038 361724, Ⓦwww.aquanautsdive.com; and Pattaya-land Soi 1, South Pattaya Ⓣ038 710727. British-run PADI Five-Star Instructor Development Centre. Also does lots of specialist cave and cavern diving.

Mermaid's Dive Centre Soi White House, Jomtien Ⓣ038 232219, Ⓦwww.learn-in-asia.com; and at Tipp Plaza between sois 10 and 11 on Beach Rd, Central Pattaya. PADI Five-Star Instructor Development Centre. Also offers IAHD programmes for disabled divers and instructors.

Watersports and golf

Both Pattaya and Jomtien are full of beachfront stalls organizing **water-skiing** (B1000/hour), **jet-skiing** (B650/30min) and **parasailing** (B500/round), though for **windsurfing** you'll need to go to Jomtien (B500/hour).

There are over fifteen international-standard **golf courses** within easy reach of Pattaya (ⓦwww.thaigolfer.com), some of them designed by famous golfers. Visitors' green fees average B1000 on a weekday, B1800 on a weekend, plus B250 for a caddy, and a set of clubs can usually be rented for about B500. One popular option is to join a golf **package** to one of the top courses organized by East Coast Travel (ⓣ038 300927, ⓦwww.pattayagolfpackage.com). The following courses are all less than an hour's drive from Pattaya, with the closest listed first and the furthest last; for directions, either call the course or ask at your hotel. Phoenix Golf and Country Club (27 holes; ⓣ038 239391); Siam Country Club (18 holes; ⓣ038 249381); Laem Chabang International Country Club (27 holes; ⓣ038 372273, ⓦwww.laemchabanggolf.com); Eastern Star Golf Course (18 holes; ⓣ038 630410); St Andrew's 2000 (18 holes; ⓣ038 893838 ⓦwww.standrews2000golf.com).

Theme parks and other attractions

The family-oriented **Pattaya Park Water Park** (daily 11am–10pm; ⓣ038 251201, ⓦwww.pattayapark.com), whose gigantic 240-metre-high tower on Buddha Hill, at the far northern end of Jomtien, is visible from all over the resort, features water slides, a Viking ship, a 170-metre jump from said tower, and other funfair-style rides, as well as three panoramic revolving restaurants (on floors 52, 53 and 54). Easiest access is by taxi, though the Jomtien songthaew will drop you within about 750m.

One of the most enjoyable indoor attractions in the resort is **Ripley's Believe It Or Not** (daily 11am–11pm; B380, kids B280, joint tickets with other Ripley attractions from an extra B100), on the third floor of the Royal Garden Plaza on Pattaya Beach Road. It's part of a worldwide chain of curiosity museums inspired by the bizarre collections of the American cartoonist and adventurer Robert Leroy Ripley, and displays lots of outlandish objects and novelties from Thailand and further afield (such as models of the world's tallest, smallest and fattest men), as well as an exhibition on sharks. The Ripley's third-floor empire also includes Ripley's Haunted Adventure plus a 4D movie-screen simulator and an infinity maze.

Advertised as the only one of its kind in the world, the **Museum of Bottle Art** (daily 11am–8pm; B100), 100m south of the bus station on Thanon Sukhumvit, contains three hundred pieces of miniature art in bottles, including Dutch windmills, Thai temples, a Saudi mosque and a British coach and horses. To see them, take an eastbound songthaew along Central Pattaya Road, get off as soon as you reach Thanon Sukhumvit, and walk 200m south.

The hugely ambitious **Sanctuary of Truth**, also known as **Wang Boran** and **Prasat Mai** (daily 8am–5pm; B500, kids B250; ⓣ038 225407, ⓦwww.sanctuaryoftruth.com; daily dolphin shows at 11.30am and 3.30pm), is also a kind of replica, but on a 1:1 scale. Conceived by the man behind the Muang Boran Ancient City complex near Bangkok (see p.160), it's a huge temple-palace designed to evoke the great ancient Khmer sanctuaries of Angkor and built entirely of wood. It was begun in 1981 and is still a work-in-progress. The sanctuary is located behind imposing crenellated walls off the west end of Naklua Soi 12, close to the *Garden Sea View* hotel; from Central Pattaya, take a Naklua-bound songthaew as far as Soi 12, then a motorbike taxi. Built in a fabulously dramatic spot beside the sea, the temple rises to 105m at its highest point and fans out into four gopura (entrance pavilions), each of which is covered in symbolic woodcarvings. The **carvings** on the north (seaside) gopura are inspired by Cambodian mythology, and include a tower above the gopura that's crowned with an image of the four-headed Hindu god Brahma; those on the east gopura refer to China, so the Mahayana Buddhist bodhisattvas have Chinese faces; the carvings on the west gopura evoke India and include scenes from the Hindu epic the *Mahabarata*; and the southern entrance has images from Thailand, such as scenes from the Hindu tale, the *Ramayana*.

There are several theme parks, "culture villages" and wildlife parks on the outskirts of Pattaya, all well signed off the main roads. **Mini Siam** (daily 8am–10pm; B100, kids B50), just north of the North Pattaya Road/Thanon Sukhumvit intersection, is just what it sounds like: the cream of Thailand's most precious monuments reconstructed to 1:25 scale, plus miniature replicas of international icons such as the Sydney Opera House and the Statue of Liberty; call Ⓣ038 421628 to arrange transport. **Nong Nooch Tropical Garden** (daily 8am-6pm; B550; Ⓣ038 429321, Ⓦwww.nongnoochtropicalgarden.com), 18km south of Pattaya off Thanon Sukhumvit, is a 600-acre botanical park that's said to have the world's largest **orchid garden**; in addition it puts on performances of traditional dancing and elephant-rides. The **Elephant Village**, 7km northeast of Pattaya, offers sixty-minute elephant "treks" round its park for B900, and there's also an elephant-training show every afternoon (2.30pm; B500). For details and transport, call Ⓣ038 249818, or visit Ⓦwww.elephant-village-pattaya.com. **Underwater World**, close to Tesco Lotus just south of the Thep Prasit junction with Thanon Sukhumvit (B360, kids B180 or free if under 90cm tall), is a small, expensive, but rather beautiful aquarium comprising a trio of long fibreglass tunnels that transport you through three different marine worlds; easiest access by songthaew would be to try and hail one travelling from Jomtien along Thanon Thep Prasit.

Eating

Overall, **food** in Pattaya and Jomtien is expensive and pretty dire, but there are some good spots. For the cheapest, most authentic Thai food, especially Isaan favourites such as som tam and fried chicken, just head for the nearest construction site (there's nearly always one within 500m) and you'll find stalls catering for the tastes and budgets of the construction-site workers, most of whom come from the northeast.

Baywatch Pattaya Beach Rd, between sois 13/3 and 13/4, Central Pattaya. Open 24hr, this is a good joint for your all-day breakfast (from B70), complete with sea view and sidewalk vantage point.

Bighorn Steakhouse Central Shopping Arcade, off Saisong 13 (Soi Diana Inn) Ⓦwww.bighornsteakhouse.com. Famous for its tenderloin steaks – priced from B340 for 200g – if you are man or woman enough to down the one-kilo steak (B1350) you get into the restaurant's hall of fame and your name on the website. Daily noon–midnight.

Bruno's 306/63 Chateau Dale Plaza, Thanon Tabphaya, Jomtien Ⓦwww.brunos-pattaya.com. A local institution that's a favourite with expats celebrating special occasions. The food is classy, expensive, European – Provençal-style rack of lamb, sirloin steak, dark-chocolate mousse – and there's a cellar of some 150 wines. Main dishes from B185. Daily noon–2.30pm & 6pm–late.

Café New Orleans Soi 13/4, Central Pattaya. Specializing in Cajun and Creole dishes, with especially recommended baby back ribs (B375), jambalaya (B235), and steaks. Mon–Fri 3pm–midnight, Sat & Sun noon–midnight.

Food Wave Seaview Food Court Top floor of the Royal Garden Plaza, Pattaya Beach Rd, Central Pattaya. Upscale food court with fine views of the bay and individual concessions serving Thai, Italian, Indian and European dishes averaging B85. Not exactly *haute cuisine*, but fast, hassle-free and fairly inexpensive for Pattaya.

Fuji Central Festival Centre, Pattaya 2 Road, North Pattaya. Phenomenally popular branch of the Japanese chain restaurant – and deservedly so. Authentic flavours and moderate prices for everything from sashimi (from B120) to teppanyaki, sushi sets and even chilled *zaru soba* noodles. Daily 11am–11pm.

King Seafood Opposite Soi 15, Walking St, South Pattaya. Considered to be the best of South Pattaya's three famously enormous seafront seafood restaurants, this place specializes in fresh seafood, in particular tiger prawns and giant lobsters for around B100–250. Daily 11am–1am.

PIC Kitchen Soi 5, North Pattaya. One of Pattaya's finest traditional Thai restaurants, set in a stylish series of teak buildings with the option of Thai-style cushion seating.

The mouth-watering menu (from B150) features elegantly presented curries, lots of different seafood platters (served grilled or fried, laced with chilli and/or coconut, or accompanied by asparagus and mushroom), spicy salads and some vegetarian dishes. Daily 8am–midnight.

La Piola Next to Tiffany's Cabaret on Pattaya 2 Rd, North Pattaya. A decent wine list and good Italian food including a ten-dish antipasto, wood-fired pizzas (from B220), Mediterranean-style fish with olives and tomatoes (from B200), and pasta with imported cheese (B300). Dine in the air-conditioned interior or outdoors with a prime view of Pattaya 2 Road's bar-beer enclave "Drinking Street". Daily 6pm–1am.

Sea Falcon Dongtan beachfront, Jomtien. Popular, mid-priced almost-on-the-beach restaurant known for its lobster and steak. Daily 8am–11pm.

Sugar Hut 391/18 Thanon Tabphaya, midway between South Pattaya and Jomtien. Attached to the charming hotel described on p.208, this restaurant gives you the chance to soak up the ambience and enjoy the tropical gardens without shelling out for a bungalow. Food is served in an open-sided *sala* and is mainly classy (and expensive) traditional Thai; recommendations include fried catfish in coconut milk and chilli, and chicken baked with pineapple. Set menus from B500–750, but worth the splurge.

Tip's 22/10 Pattaya Beach Rd, between sois 13/4 and 13/5, South Pattaya. Long-running Pattaya institution offering over a dozen different set breakfasts (from B70). Daily 6.40am–midnight.

Drinking and nightlife

Entertainment is Pattaya's *raison d'être* and the **nightlife** is what most tourists come for, as do expats from Laem Chabang port, oilfield workers from the Arabian Gulf and shore-leave marines on R&R. Of the thousand-plus **bars** in Pattaya, the majority are the so-called "bar-beers", open-air drinking spots staffed by hostesses who flirt, charm and banter their way through the afternoons and nights, encouraging punters to buy as much beer as possible and, ideally, to round off the night by taking one of them back to the hotel. Sex makes more money than booze in Pattaya – depending on who you believe, there are between six thousand and twenty thousand Thais working in Pattaya's sex industry; most depressing of all is the fact that this workforce includes children as young as 10, a disgusting iniquity that persists in spite of fairly frequent high-profile paedophile arrests. Sex-for-sale is an all-pervasive trade here: there are hundreds of go-go bars in town, and even the uninspiring discos – such as the huge and sleazy *Marine Disco* and *Lucifer's*, both towards the southern end of Walking Street, and the enormous *Palace*, just north of the intersection of Soi 1 and Pattaya 2 Road in North Pattaya – are just great big pick-up joints.

Bars

Pattaya's outdoor **bar-beers** group themselves in clusters all over North, Central and South Pattaya: there's barely a 500-metre stretch of road without its bar-beer enclave. The setup is the same in all of them: from mid-afternoon the punters – usually lone males – sit on stools around a brashly lit circular bar, behind which the hostesses keep the drinks, bawdy chat and well-worn jokes flowing. Beer is generally inexpensive at these places, the atmosphere low-key and good-humoured, and, though most of the hostesses are aiming to score for the night, couples as well as single women drinkers are almost always made welcome.

Drinks are a lot more expensive in the bouncer-guarded **go-go bars** on Walking Street in South Pattaya, where near-naked hostesses serve the beer and live sex shows keep the boozers hooked through the night. The scene follows much the same pattern as in Patpong, Nana and Soi Cowboy in Bangkok, with the women dancing on a small stage in the hope they might be bought for the night – or the week. Go-go dancers, shower shows and striptease are also the mainstays of the **gay scene**, centred on Pattayaland Soi 3 (Soi 13/5), South Pattaya.

△ Walking Street, South Pattaya

There's not a great deal of demand for **bars** where the emphasis is on simple companionable drinking, but those listed below are comparatively low-key and welcoming.

The Blues Factory Soi Lucky Star, Walking Street, South Pattaya Ⓦ www.thebluesfactorypattaya.com. Considered to be the best live-music venue in Pattaya, with nightly sets (except Mondays) from the famously charismatic rock guitarist Lam Morrison and his band, and (except on Wednesdays) from the house blues band as well. Happy hour 8.30–10pm.

Green Bottle Adjacent to *Diana Inn*, Pattaya 2 Rd, Central Pattaya. A cosy, air-con, pub-style bar that has forged a studiously unsleazy atmosphere and serves European food to keep you going just that little bit longer.

Hard Rock Café Just north of Central Pattaya Rd on Pattaya Beach Rd, Central Pattaya. Fairly standard franchise of the international chain, with nightly entertainment from a DJ and house band that do the usual classic pop and rock hits. Large cocktail menu plus a selection of burgers and salads to soak up the alcohol.

Heineken Beer Garden Central Festival Centre, Pattaya 2 Road, North Pattaya. Outdoor tables and live music nightly (from about 8pm) from Thai singers and bands, doing mostly Thai pop and country.

Hopf Brew House Between sois 13/1 (Yamato) and 13/2 (Post Office), Pattaya Beach Rd, Central Pattaya. Cavernous air-con pub, designed like a German beer hall around an internal courtyard, with a stage for the nightly live music. Attracts a youngish crowd, including vacationing couples, and serves bar snacks as well as beer.

Jazz Pit Soi 5, North Pattaya. Nightly live jazz (from 8pm) from the in-house trio in the cosy lounge-bar adjacent to the *PIC Kitchen* restaurant, and occasional high-profile celeb jamming sessions.

Kum Punn Pub Soi 2, North Pattaya. Typically Thai take on a country-and-western bar (lots of wood and the occasional buffalo head) that's known for its live bands who play nightly sets of authentic Thai folk music as well as soft rock.

Pig & Whistle Soi 7, Central Pattaya. Homely English-style pub that serves fish and chips, hosts twice-weekly quiz nights (Mon & Thurs) and shows all the major international sports events on its giant screen.

Shamrock Pattayaland 2 (Soi 13/4), South Pattaya. This British-run bar is a good place to catch local expat gossip. The manager sometimes entertains customers on his banjo, and his collection of folk-music tapes is also worth listening out for. On the edge of the gay district, but attracts a mixed crowd.

Shenanigans Next to the Royal Garden Plaza, Pattaya 2 Rd, Central Pattaya. Irish pub that keeps Guinness, Kilkenny Bitter and John Smith, serves UK-style pub food, and shows all major sports events on its big screen. Daily 9am till late.

Cabarets

Tour groups – and families – constitute the main audience at Pattaya's **transvestite cabarets**. Glamorous and highly professional, these shows are performed three times a night at Alcazar, opposite Soi 4 on Pattaya 2 Road in North Pattaya; and at Tiffany's, north of Soi 1 on Pattaya 2 Road in North Pattaya. Each theatre has a troupe of sixty or more transvestites who run through twenty musical-style numbers in fishnets and crinolines, ball gowns and leathers, against ever more lavish stage sets. All glitz and no sleaze, the shows cost B400-600 per person. The even more ambitious Alangkarn (Tues–Sun from 6pm; B1400 including transport; ⓣ038 256000, ⓦwww.alangkarnthailand.com) is a Thai **cultural extravaganza** evening held at the Alangkarn Theatre in far southern Jomtien, featuring a highly theatrical medley of classical dance, martial arts, acrobatics and pyrotechnics; contact any tour agent for tickets and transport.

Shopping

Pattaya is not a bad place for **shopping**, especially at the two main shopping plazas – the Central Festival Centre on Pattaya 2 Road in North Pattaya, and Royal Garden Plaza in South Pattaya – which both have tempting arrays of fairly classy shops, ranging from designer clothes boutiques to smart gift and handicraft outlets, as well as branches of Boots the Chemist. Royal Garden Plaza 2nd floor also has a Jim Thompson Factory Sales outlet for silks and cottons.

Pattaya boasts some of Thailand's best English-language **bookshops** outside Bangkok. DK Books (daily 8am–11pm) on Soi 13/2 stocks a phenomenal range of books on Asia, and has a smaller branch north up Beach Road, on the corner of Central Pattaya Road. Bookazine, on the first floor of the Royal Garden Plaza in South Pattaya, and at Dongtan Beach in Jomtien, also has an impressive selection of titles, plus stacks of maps, but is best known for its unrivalled choice of international magazines. Book Corner on Soi 13/2 is another rewarding place to browse for Southeast Asian titles.

Listings

Airlines Bangkok Airways, 75/8 Pattaya 2 Rd, Central Pattaya ⓣ038 412382; Thai Airways, inside the *Dusit Resort*, North Pattaya ⓣ038 420995.

Cinemas Central Cineplex, on the top floor of the Central Festival Centre on Pattaya 2 Rd in North Pattaya, runs several English-language shows a day at each of its four screens. There's also a three-screen cinema on the top floor of Royal Garden Plaza in South Pattaya. See ⓦwww.movieseer.com for programmes

Dentists At the Bangkok-Pattaya Hospital ⓣ038 259999 on Thanon Sukhumvit, about 400m north of the intersection with North Pattaya Rd; and at Pattaya International Hospital on Soi 4 ⓣ038 428374–5.

Emergencies For all emergencies, call the tourist police on the free, 24hr phone line ⓣ1155, contact them at their booth on Pattaya 2 Rd, just south of Soi 6, Central Pattaya ⓣ038 429371, or call in at the more central police station on Beach Rd, just south of Soi 9.

Exchange There are numerous exchange counters and ATMs, particularly on Pattaya Beach Rd and Pattaya 2 Rd.

Hospitals The best-equipped hospital is the Bangkok-Pattaya Hospital ⓣ038 259999, emergency ⓣ038 259911 ⓦwww.bangkokpattayahospital.com on Thanon Sukhumvit, about 400m north of the intersection with North Pattaya Rd. Other central private hospitals include the Pattaya

International Hospital on Soi 4 ⓣ038 428374–5, ⓦwww.pih-inter.com, and Pattaya Memorial Hospital on Central Pattaya Rd ⓣ038 429422–4. There are three recompression chambers in the area: at the Bangkok-Pattaya Hospital (see above); at the Apakorn Kiatiwong Naval Hospital in Sattahip, 26km south of Pattaya ⓣ038 601185; and at the Queen Sirikit Hospital, also in Sattahip ⓣ038 245926.

Immigration office Soi 5, off Jomtien Beach Road, Jomtien (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm; ⓣ038 252750). Many travel agents offer cheap visa-renewal day-trips to Cambodia: check advertisements and local press for details.

Internet access There are dozens of Internet centres throughout the resort, including the efficient but pricey 24hr *Explorer Cyber Café*, between sois 9 and 10 on Pattaya Beach Rd.

Mail The post office is, not surprisingly, on Soi Post Office in Central Pattaya, though the road has now officially been re-signed as Soi 13/2.

Telephones The main CAT international telephone office is on South Pattaya Rd, just east of the junction with Pattaya 3 Rd. There are lots of private international call centres in the resort.

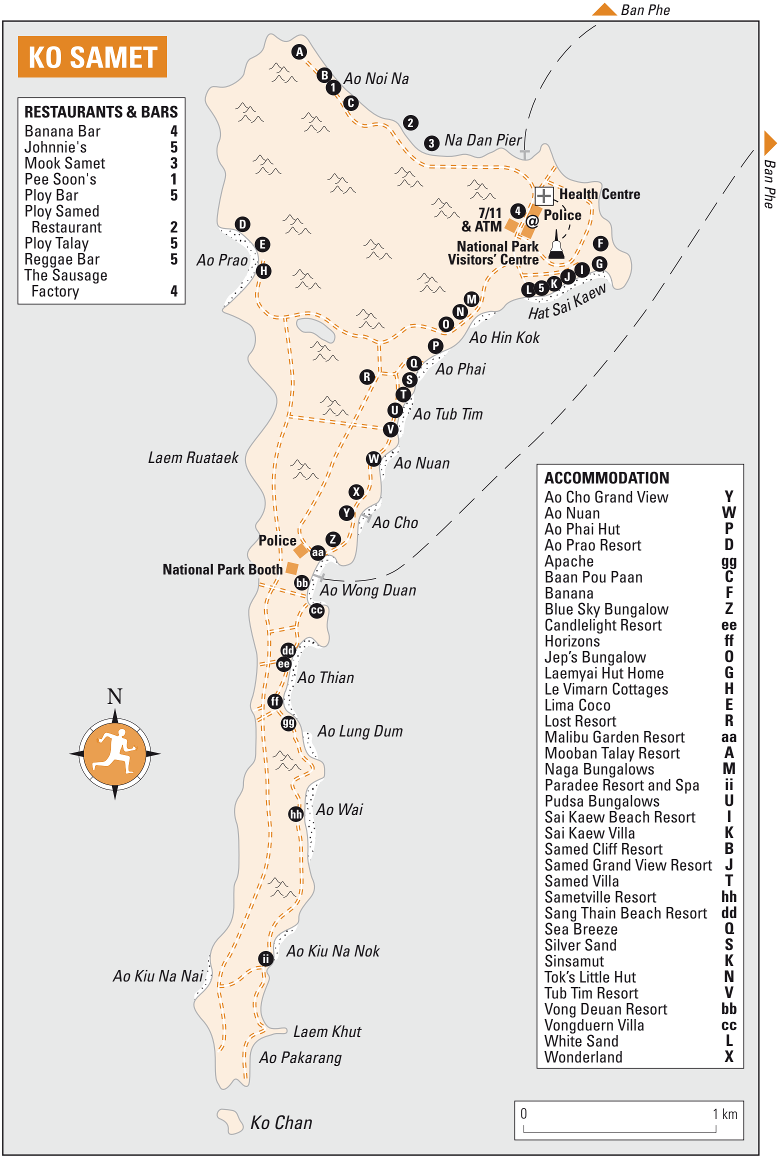
Rayong

Few farang travellers choose to stop for longer than they have to in the busy and fast-expanding provincial capital of **RAYONG**, 65km southeast of Pattaya, but it's a useful place for transport connections (see Travel Details for destinations), especially if you're trying to get to Ko Samet; Ban Phe, the ferry pier for Ko Samet (see below), is about 17km east and served by frequent songthaews from Rayong bus station (every 30min; 30min). A direct bus service from Bangkok's new Suvarnabhumi Airport is also planned. Rayong has long been famous for producing the national condiment *nam plaa* – a sauce made from decomposed fish – as well as for the pineapples and durian grown in the provincial orchards, but these days it's the gas- and oil-refining industries that are responsible for the city's breakneck growth.

The **TAT office** (ⓣ038 655420, ⓔtatryong@tat.or.th) for the Rayong region and Ko Samet is inconveniently located 7km east of Rayong town centre at 153/4 Thanon Sukhumvit (Highway 3), on the way to Ban Phe; any Ban Phe-bound bus or songthaew will drop you at its door. There's a bank with **exchange** counter opposite the access road to Rayong's bus station on Thanon Sukhumvit and the area's best **hospital**, the private Bangkok-Rayong Hospital (ⓣ038 612999, ⓦwww.rayonghospital.com), is just south off Thanon Sukhumvit on Soi Saengchan Neramit. If you get stuck in town overnight, you can rent cheap, no-frills fan and air-con **rooms** at the *Asia Hotel*, just east of the bus station and north off Thanon Sukhumvit at no. 962/1 (ⓣ038 611022; ①–③), or there's better, more comfortable accommodation at the *Burapa Palace*, 100m east of the bus station on the south side of Thanon Sukhumvit at no. 69 (ⓣ038 622946; ③–⑤).

Ko Samet

Attracted by its proximity to Bangkok and its famously powdery white sand, backpackers, package tourists and Thai families flock to the island of **Ko Samet**, 80km southeast of Pattaya. Only 6km long, Ko Samet was declared a **national park** in 1981, but typically the ban on building has been ignored and there are now well over thirty bungalow operations here, with owners paying rent to the Royal Forestry Department. Inevitably, these developments have had a huge impact on the island's resources: waste water from many bungalows is dumped into the sea, you quite often stumble across piles of rotting rubbish, and the grounds of many bungalows are poorly landscaped and disfigured by construction detritus. The


KO SAMET
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Ao Noi Na
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Health Centre
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Police
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RESTAURANTS & BARS	
Banana Bar	4
Johnnie's	5
Mook Samet	3
Pee Soon's	1
Ploy Bar	5
Ploy Samed Restaurant	2
Ploy Talay	5
Reggae Bar	5
The Sausage Factory	4

ACCOMMODATION	
Ao Cho Grand View	Y
Ao Nuan	W
Ao Phai Hut	P
Ao Prao Resort	D
Apache	gg
Baan Pou Paan	C
Banana	F
Blue Sky Bungalow	Z
Candlelight Resort	ee
Horizons	ff
Jep's Bungalow	O
Laemyai Hut Home	G
Le Vimarn Cottages	H
Lima Coco	E
Lost Resort	R
Malibu Garden Resort	aa
Mooban Talay Resort	A
Naga Bungalows	M
Paradee Resort and Spa	ii
Pudsa Bungalows	U
Sai Kaew Beach Resort	I
Sai Kaew Villa	K
Samed Cliff Resort	B
Samed Grand View Resort	J
Samed Villa	T
Sametville Resort	hh
Sang Thain Beach Resort	dd
Sea Breeze	Q
Silver Sand	S
Sinsamut	K
Tok's Little Hut	N
Tub Tim Resort	V
Vong Deuan Resort	bb
Vongduern Villa	cc
White Sand	L
Wonderland	X

dazzling white beaches, however, remain breathtakingly beautiful and are still, for the moment at least, lapped by pale blue water.

As the island gets increasingly upmarket, it is becoming almost impossible to find a bungalow for under B500 in high season; the most backpacker-oriented **beaches** are Ao Hin Kok, Ao Phai and Ao Tub Tim; Ao Hin Kok and Ao Phai are also quite lively in the evenings. Ao Prao, Ao Wong Duan and Hat Sai Kaew are dominated by upmarket accommodation and attract families and package tourists as well as Bangkok trendies. In accordance with national park rules, **camping** is permissible on any of the beaches, despite what you might be told.

All beaches get packed at **weekends** and national holidays: you could try phoning ahead to reserve a room, though not every place accepts bookings. Many bungalow managers raise their rates by sixty percent during peak periods and sometimes for weekenders as well: the rates quoted here are typical high-season rates.

En route to the island: Ban Phe

The mainland departure-point for Ko Samet is the tiny fishing port of **BAN PHE**, about 17km east of Rayong and some 200km from Bangkok. There are hourly direct **buses** from Bangkok's Eastern (Ekamai) Bus Terminal to the Ban Phe pier, departing between 5am and 7pm, then at 8.30pm (3hr 10min), or you could take one of the more frequent buses to **Rayong** from either the Eastern Bus Terminal (every 40min; 2hr 40min) or the Northern Bus Terminal (every 30min; 2hr 30min–3hr 30min) and then change onto a songthaew to the pier as described on p.215. Alternatively, **tourist minibuses** run from Thanon Khao San to Ban Phe (B200–250; about 4hr); prices for these rarely include the boat fare and you should be prepared for some fairly crazed driving. A meter-taxi ride from **Bangkok** or the airport should cost around B2500. From **Pattaya**, there are hardly any direct Ban Phe buses so it's easier to take a bus to Rayong and then a songthaew. There are, however, tourist minibuses from Pattaya, which cost B180 – note that the B70 boat ticket available as an add-on to this fare is for Ao Wong Duan, so if you want to go to one of Samet's other beaches, don't buy your boat ticket until you get to Ban Phe. Coming by bus from points further east, such as **Chanthaburi** or **Trat**, you'll most likely be dropped at the Ban Phe junction on Highway 3, from where a songthaew or motorbike taxi will take you the remaining 5km to the pier.

If you get stuck with nothing to do between ferries, there are several places to check your **email** on and around Ban Phe's main pier-head, along with traveller-oriented restaurants, minimarkets and travel agents. You should also stock up on money here – the **bank** has currency exchange and an ATM – as the ATM on Ko Samet always runs out of money at weekends and during holidays, and island bungalows offer poor exchange rates. There are a few **accommodation** options around the piers: the *Diamond Hotel* (☎038 651757; fan ③, air-con ④), on the two-hundred-metre stretch of road between the main Taruaphe pier and the Ao Prao (Saphaan Sri Ban Phe) pier, is open 24hr, and has comfortable air-con rooms with TV, as well as cheaper fan options. The travellers' restaurant *Tan Tan Too*, on Soi 2 (where the minivans stop), across the road from the main Taruaphe pier, rents out a couple of large fan and air-con rooms with private bathrooms and DVD players (☎038 653671, Ⓔbwanabrad@yahoo.com.au; ③–④) and serves pizza, pies, falafels, veggie food and more at its two restaurants. It also has Internet terminals, rents bicycles (B50/day), sells minivan tickets to Bangkok's Khao San (B250) and Ko Chang (B250) and offers taxi services to Bangkok (B2000) and the airport (B2500). Next door, the **secondhand bookshop** Blue Sky Green Sea stocks a range of titles far superior to anything you'll find on Ko Samet.

Boats to Ko Samet

Once in Ban Phe, you need to decide which beach you want and then choose your **boat** accordingly. Some boats are owned by individual resorts and ferry both pre-paid package tourists and fare-paying independent travellers; others make the crossing as soon as they have enough passengers (minimum eighteen people) or sufficient cargo to make it worth their while. In theory, boats to the two main piers on Ko Samet run hourly from 8am to 5pm during high season (Nov–Feb) and on national holidays, and every two hours at other times. In practice, many of the boats leave at the same time, so you may end up waiting a couple of hours. Fares are standardized on each route. It's also increasingly common to charter a **speedboat** (carrying up to ten people) to the beach of your choice; prices start at B800 to Hat Sai Kaew.

The easiest place to get to on Ko Samet is **Na Dan pier** on the northeastern tip of the island, which is the most convenient arrival point for the beaches of Hat Sai Kaew, Ao Hin Kok, Ao Phai, Ao Tub Tim and Ao Nuan, and quite feasible for all the other beaches as well; songthaews meet the boats at Na Dan (see below) and will take you as far as Ao Wong Duan, or you can walk to your chosen beach – the whole island is little more than 6km long. Boats to Na Dan leave from Ban Phe's Taruabanphe pier, opposite the 7-11 shop; they take thirty minutes to get to Samet and charge B50 one-way.

There are equally frequent boats to **Ao Wong Duan** (40min; B60), which is also convenient for the nearby beaches of Ao Cho and Ao Thian. Some of the bungalow resorts on the smaller beaches also run boats from Ban Phe direct to their beach – see the individual beach accounts for details.

Island practicalities

Foreign visitors are charged the B200 national-park **entrance fee** on arrival (B100 for children under 14 or free for the under-3s), payable either at the checkpoint between the Na Dan pier and Hat Sai Kaew (where there is a national park visitor centre, with displays on Ko Samet's marine life); or at one of the booths on the other beaches. A share-taxi **songthaew** service meets the Na Dan ferries and runs to the beaches: fares are posted at Na Dan pier and range from B10 to 100 to Hat Sai Kaew or B50 to 500 to Ao Kiu, depending on the number of passengers. There are **motorbikes** for rent at Na Dan pier, on the Na Dan-Hat Sai Kaew road, and on every beach (B100/hour or B300–400/day), but the tracks are very rough and riddled with deep potholes so not ideal for inexperienced riders. It would be even harder work on a **bicycle**, but you can rent bikes on the Na Dan-Hat Sai Kaew road for B100/day.

Small shops in Na Dan and on Hat Sai Kaew, Ao Phai, Tub Tim and Ao Wong Duan sell basic travellers' necessities at slightly higher prices than in Ban Phe and Rayong. There's an **ATM** at the 7-11 on the Na Dan-Hat Sai Kaew road (though it invariably runs out of cash at weekends and holidays) and the bigger bungalows also **change money**, albeit at less favourable rates than on the mainland. There are **international phone services** and **Internet centres** on the Na Dan-Hat Sai Kaew road and on almost every beach, and the island's **post office** is run by *Naga Bungalows* on Ao Hin Kok (see p.221). CP Travel on Hat Sai Kaew (☎038 644136), among the beachfront shops near *Sinsamut*, sells domestic and international **air tickets** as well as train, bus and minibus tickets and package tours. Ko Samet's **health centre** and **police station** (☎038 644111) are on the Na Dan-Hat Sai Kaew road, but for anything serious you should make for the Bangkok-Rayong hospital in Rayong (see p.215).

Samet has no fresh **water**, so water is trucked in from the mainland and should be used sparingly; **electricity** in some places is rationed for evening consumption only. Many bungalows have **safety deposits** and it's well worth making use of them: theft is becoming an issue on Samet and there are occasional instances of drinks being spiked by freelance bar girls and punters waking next day without their valuables.

Leaving Ko Samet

Several **scheduled boats** leave Ko Samet's Na Dan pier every day, currently at about 7am, 8am, 10am, noon and 5pm, and there are usually a few extra ones in between; times are posted at the pier, but if you have a plane to catch you should allow for boat no-shows and delays. There are also at least three departures from Ao Wong Duan (8.30am, 11.30am and 3.30pm) and in high season you'll find at least one Ban Phe boat a day from Ao Cho and Ao Prao.

Arriving at Ban Phe, you can pick up **buses** to Bangkok, Chanthaburi or Trat, or a songthaew to Rayong, from where buses to all these destinations, plus Pattaya and Si Racha, are far more frequent (see p.215). The Ban Phe bus and songthaew stop is 400m east of the 7-11 shop, though most buses and songthaews pass the pier-head and will pick up passengers there. If you're heading straight back to Bangkok's Thanon Khao San or to Pattaya, your easiest (and most expensive) option is to buy a direct **tourist bus/minivan** ticket from one of Ko Samet's numerous tour operators; these tickets don't include the boat fare, but departure times from Ban Phe are arranged to coincide with boat arrivals. You can also book tourist buses at the tour operators' offices in Ban Phe on Soi 2 behind the 7-11, across from the main pier, though they may not always have room for last-minute bookings. Travelling to **Ko Chang**, it takes just two and a half hours by tourist bus/minivan from Ban Phe to the Laem Ngop pier, though it's expensive at B250 plus the boat fare and buses often "just miss" the 3pm outer-island ferry departures from Laem Ngop; the alternative route by ordinary bus can take all day and often entails changing buses at Chanthaburi and then getting onto a Laem Ngop-bound songthaew in Trat, though it works out at half the price.

Around the island

Most islanders live in the **northeast** of the island, in ramshackle, badly drained Na Dan, which has small shops and foodstalls, as well as the island's only school, health centre and wat. Samet's best **beaches** are along the **east coast**, and this is where you'll find nearly all the bungalow resorts. A rough path connects some of them; otherwise it's a question of walking along the beach at low tide or over the low, rocky points at high water. The **north coast** has just one really beautiful stretch of beach but compensates with an appealing village atmosphere. Long stretches of the **west coast** are well-nigh inaccessible, though at intervals the coastal scrub has been cleared to make way for a track. The views from these clifftop clearings can be magnificent, particularly around sunset, but you can only safely descend to sea level at Ao Prao, near the northwest headland. A few narrow tracks – mostly signed at crucial junctions and generally straightforward to navigate – cross the island's forested central ridge to link the east and west coasts, but much of the **interior** is dense jungle, home of hornbills, gibbons and spectacular butterflies.

Samet has no decent coral reefs of its own, so you'll have to take a boat trip to the islands of Ko Kudi, Ko Thalu and Ko Mun, off the northeast coast, to get good **snorkelling** and **fishing**. Trips cost from B500 to B1000 including equipment, and depart from all the main beaches. Some places also offer full-day boat trips around Samet itself for about B400. Despite the lack of great reefs (it's hard coral only around here) there are a couple of **dive operators** on Samet: Ploy Scuba (Ⓣ038 644212, Ⓦwww.ployscuba.com) on Hat Sai Kaew and Ao Noi Na, and Ao Prao Divers (Ⓣ038 644100, Ⓔaopraodivers@hotmail.com) on Hat Sai Kaew and Ao Prao. Four-day Openwater courses cost B14,000 and day-trips with two tanks cost about B3500. The bigger beaches offer jet skis, banana boat rides

(B1000/30min) and water-skiing (B1500 for 30min), and *Naga* on Ao Hin Kok has a gym (daily 8am–9.30pm) and runs daily **muay thai training** sessions (daily 3.30–8pm; B100-250)

Hat Sai Kaew

Arriving at **Na Dan** pier, a ten-minute walk south along the track brings you to **HAT SAI KAEW**, or Diamond Beach, named for its long and extraordinarily beautiful stretch of luxuriant sand, so soft and clean it squeaks underfoot – a result, apparently, of its unusually high silicon content, which also makes it an excellent raw material for glass-making. Songthaews from Na Dan to Hat Sai Kaew cost B10 per person, or B100 when chartered.

The most popular – and congested – beach on Samet, Hat Sai Kaew's shore is lined with bungalows, restaurants, beachwear stalls, deckchairs and parasols. Holidaying Thais and farangs flock here in pretty much equal numbers, especially at weekends, though the northern end is usually slightly more peaceful than the southern.

At night, you have a choice of fairly pricey seafront seafood **restaurants**, some of which, like *Ploy Talay*, set out mats and cushions for diners on the sand. For drinks under the stars, there are several beachside bars, among them *Johnnie's* and the *Reggae Bar*, as well as the air-con live-music *Ploy Bar*. Alternatively you could head down the Hat Sai Kaew-Na Dan road, where you'll find several congenial little restaurants, whose good food and reasonable prices mean that long-stay island farangs tend to congregate here. The tiny *Banana Bar*, not far from the police station, serves authentic Thai food, including yellow, green and massaman curries for B60, as well as tom yums and spicy salads, but closes by 10pm. British-run *The Sausage Factory*, a bit towards Hat Sai Kaew, is the place for authentic English breakfasts and meat pies.

There's **Internet access** at *Sai Kaew Villa* on the beach, and at several Internet cafés around the National Park office on the Hat Sai Kaew-Na Dan road. You can arrange **dive** trips through Ao Prao Divers and Ploy Scuba (see p.219) and make travel arrangements through CP Travel (see p.218).

Accommodation

Such is the popularity of this beach that much of the **accommodation** here is crammed uncomfortably close together and in high season it's impossible to find a room by the sea for under B500. However, if you ask at the little bars on the Na Dan-Hat Sai Kaew road, you should be able to rent one of their urban guesthouse-style rooms for a more affordable price (B150–300).

Banana ⓣ038 644193, ⓦwww.samedresorts.com. Although this is actually the deluxe cottage wing of the *Sai Kaew Beach Resort*, it's on its own secluded patch of coast and in a style class of its own. It's the most desirable accommodation on Hat Sai Kaew, if not the entire island. The vibe is funky-beach chic, with contemporary colour schemes, air-con and TV, garden bathrooms, and private decks. The bungalows occupy their own grassy haven with swimming pool, in front of a pretty but minute little patch of sandy shoreline and it's only a couple of minutes' walk to the beach in front of *Sai Kaew Beach*. ⑨

Laemyai Hut Home ⓣ038 644282. These comfortable wooden bungalows with fan or air-con occupy one of the prettiest spots on the beach, under the Laem Yai headland at the nicest, far northern end of Hat Sai Kaew. Not to be confused with the decrepit *Nampet Ploy* bungalows on the (barely defined) adjacent plot to the south. Fan, ⑤, air-con ⑥

Sai Kaew Beach Resort ⓣ038 644193, ⓦwww.samedresorts.com. Distinctive and stylish blue-and-white bungalows, thoughtfully if quite simply designed, and a cut above everywhere else on this beach except sister outfit *Banana*. All bungalows have phones, TV and air-con and the priciest have uninterrupted sea views. ⑨

Sai Kaew Villa ⓣ038 644144, ⓦwww.saikaew.com. Set in attractively landscaped gardens, this large and efficiently run place comprises over 100 rooms with fan or air-con, some in a hotel-like block, others in prettier, more expensive bungalows. The price drops a little for every night you stay. Fan room ⑤, fan bungalow ⑥, air-con ⑦

Samed Grand View Resort ⓣ038 644220, ⓦwww.grandviewgroup.net. Bungalows here are built to an unimaginative standard concrete-and-tile design but are at least widely spaced around a garden that runs down to the beachfront. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑦

Sinsamut ⓣ038 644134, ⓦwww.sinsamut-kohsamed.com. Initial appearances aren't encouraging here, with various types of rooms stuffed into cheek-by-jowl little blocks behind the restaurant midway down the beach, but most rooms are very pleasant inside, with bright, contemporary decor, and many enjoying some outdoor space. There are even some quirky fan bungalows set around a little upstairs garden. Fan ④, air-con ⑥

White Sand Resort ⓣ038 644004. This huge complex of standard-issue bungalows in a garden behind the shorefront shops dominates the southern end of the beach. Rooms here are unexciting but relatively well priced for this beach, and there's a choice between fan or air-con. Fan ④, air-con ⑥

Ao Hin Kok

Separated from Hat Sai Kaew by a low promontory on which sits a mermaid statue – a reference to Sunthorn Phu's early nineteenth-century poem, *Phra Abhai Mani* (see box on p.223) – **AO HIN KOK** is smaller and less cluttered than its neighbour, and has more of a travellers' vibe, though it's still no bargain. There are three bungalow outfits here, overlooking the beach from the slope on the far side of the track. **Songthaews** from Na Dan will drop you at Ao Hin Kok for B20 per person (or B150 when chartered), or you can walk here in about fifteen minutes.

The English-run *Naga Bungalows* (ⓣ038 644167; ⓔsuewildnaga@gmail.com; fan ③–④, air-con ④–⑥) has some of the cheapest **accommodation** on Ko Samet. It offers simple bamboo and wood huts with decks, mosquito nets, platform beds and shared facilities as well as pricier concrete bungalows with their own adjacent bathroom and optional air-con. It's very popular, and has a library as well as a gym and *muay thai* ring. Next door, the blue-painted bungalows at *Tok's Little Hut* (ⓣ038 644072; fan ②–④, air-con ⑤) are built high on stilts up the denuded slope and so nearly all enjoy some kind of view from their verandas; they're en suite and comfortable inside, if a bit dilapidated, and are pretty good value for Samet – price depends on distance from the seafront and whether you want fan or air-con. The efficiently managed *Jep's Bungalow* (ⓣ038 644112, ⓦwww.jepbungalow.com; ⑥) has the most upmarket accommodation on Ao Hin Hok, in well-maintained smart wooden chalets and concrete bungalows, all with air-con and TV and again ranged up the slope.

Ao Hin Kok is a good beach for **restaurants**. *Naga* does lots of vegetarian dishes, and sells home-made bread, cakes and pizzas; it also has a pool table, a *muay thai* boxing ring and puts on fire-juggling shows. *Tok's Little Hut* is known for its seafood, and has a nice little beach bar, but *Jep's* is the most popular of the three, serving up a great menu of authentic Thai curries, seafood, home-made pizzas, brownies and other travellers' fare at its tables on the beach, prettily decorated with lights in the trees and given extra atmosphere by mellow music. A nearby cappuccino stall does various fresh and liqueur coffees.

Ko Samet **post office** is run out of *Naga Bungalows* and offers a parcel-packing, phone, fax and **Internet** service as well as poste restante; letters are kept for three months and should be addressed c/o Poste Restante, Ko Samet, Ban Phe, Rayong 21160.

Ao Phai

Narrow little **AO PHAI**, around the next headland, is Samet's party beach, with the shoreside *Silver Sand* bar and disco famous across the island for its late-night dance music and fire-juggling shows fuelled by cocktails and buckets of vodka Red Bull. Not everyone has to join in though, as the bungalows on the fringes of

△ Ao Hin Kok, Ko Samet.

Sunthorn Phu and Phra Abhai Mani

Over thirty thousand lines long and written entirely in verse, the nineteenth-century romantic epic **Phra Abhai Mani** tells the story of a young prince and his adventures in a fantastical land peopled not only by giants and mermaids, but also by gorgeous women with whom he invariably falls in love. Seduced by an ogress who lives beneath the sea, and kept captive by her for several months, Phra Abhai Mani pines for dry land and eventually persuades a mermaid to help him escape. Naturally, the two fall in love, and decide to spend some time together on the nearby island of Ko Samet (hence the mermaid statue on Ao Hin Kok). But the prince soon tires of the mermaid's charms, and leaps aboard a passing ship in pursuit of another ill-fated affair, this time with a princess already engaged to someone else. And so it goes on.

Widely considered to be one of Thailand's greatest-ever poets, **Sunthorn Phu** (1786–1856) is said to have based much of his work on his own life, and the romantic escapades of *Phra Abhai Mani* are no exception. By all accounts, the man was a colourful character – a philandering commoner alternately in and out of favour at Bangkok's Grand Palace, where he lived and worked for much of his life. By the time Rama II ascended the throne in 1809, he was well established as the court poet, acting as literary aide to the king. However, he took to the bottle, was left by his wife and participated in a drunken fight that landed him in jail. It was during this stint inside (thought to have been around 1821) that he started work on *Phra Abhai Mani*. The poem took twenty years to complete and was rented out in instalments to provide the poet with a modest income – necessary as royal patronage was withdrawn during the reign of Rama III (1824–51), whose literary efforts Sunthorn Phu had once rashly criticized, and only revived when Rama IV was crowned in 1851.

Aside from authoring several timeless romances, Sunthorn Phu is remembered as a significant **poetic innovator**. Up until the end of the eighteenth century, Thai poetry had been the almost exclusive domain of high-born courtiers and kings, written in an elevated Thai incomprehensible to most of the population, and concerned mainly with the moral Hindu epics the *Mahabarata* and the *Ramayana*. Sunthorn Phu changed all that by writing of love triangles, thwarted romances and heartbreaking departures; he also composed travel poems, or *nirat*, about his own journeys to well-known places in Thailand. Most crucially, he wrote them all in the common, easy-to-understand language of vernacular Thai. Not surprisingly, he's still much admired. In the province of Rayong, he's the focus of a special memorial park, constructed, complete with statues of his most famous fictional characters, on the site of his father's home in Klaeng.

the bay are far enough away for a good night's sleep. There's a minimarket on the beach, and *Sea Breeze* has a small library, sells boat trips and minibus tickets, rents out windsurfing equipment and offers overseas telephone and money-exchange facilities. **Songthaews** from Na Dan cost B20 per person to Ao Phai (or B150 when chartered), or you can walk it in twenty minutes.

Ao Phai Hut (Ⓣ038 644075; fan ④, air-con ⑥) sits on the rocky divide between Ao Phai and Hin Kok and offers a big range of rather variable split-bamboo and concrete **huts**, the more basic ones set in a scruffy area among the trees, the pricier options, some of them with air-con, occupying a more scenic spot overlooking the rocky end of the shore. *Sea Breeze* (Ⓣ038 644124, Ⓕ038 644125; ④–⑥) is the largest set of bungalows on the beach, offering simple wooden huts, more solid concrete row houses and bigger bungalows with air-con; as they're built up an unappealingly sparse wooded slope, none has a sea view. The adjacent *Silver Sand* (Ⓣ038 644301, Ⓦwww.silversandresort.com; ⑦) has very nice, if small, white-plank air-con chalets with decent bathrooms and verandas ranged around a pretty garden plus some terraced rooms too. The huge villa-style bungalows at the Swiss-run *Samed Villa* (Ⓣ038 644094, Ⓦwww.samedvilla.com; ⑦) are packed into a fairly small area along the rocks at the southern end of the bay and up the slope behind the restaurant, but interiors are pretty luxurious in a standard hotel-style way (complete with fitted wardrobes) and all have air-con and TV. Immediately behind *Sea Breeze*, on the road to Wong Duan, the two-storey block that is *Lost Resort* (Ⓣ038 644041, Ⓔlostresort-kosamet@yahhoo.com; fan ④, air-con ⑤) sits peacefully in a grove of tall trees, just a couple of minutes' walk from the beach but with no sea view. The twelve rooms here can be fan or air-con and are of a good standard and well priced, especially for air-con.

Ao Tub Tim

Also known as Ao Pudsa, **AO TUB TIM** is a small white-sand bay sandwiched between rocky points, partly shaded with palms and backed by a wooded slope. It has just two bungalow operations and feels secluded, if a bit crowded, but is only a short stroll from Ao Phai and the other beaches further north. **Songthaews** will bring you here from Na Dan pier for B20 per person (or B150 when chartered), or you can walk it in about thirty minutes.

The most popular of the two **places to stay** on Tub Tim is the sprawling, well-run *Tub Tim Resort* (Ⓣ038 644025, Ⓦwww.tubtimresort.com; fan ④–⑤, air-con ⑥–⑦) with around sixty bungalows of various sizes, designs and comfort including some very good wooden ones. Unusually, seafront positions are not all bagged by air-con bungalows so you could get a fairly cheap fan room with sea view (air-con is available only 5pm–10am). The 🏃 *Tub Tim Resort* restaurant is very good indeed, especially for north Thai cuisine such as *haw mok* (ground fish curry steamed in banana leaf). The smaller outfit on the beach is the adjacent *Pudsa Bungalows* (Ⓣ038 644030; fan ⑤, air-con ⑦), which offers a range of large, sturdy huts, including some that sit alongside the track and enjoy direct sea views.

Ao Nuan

Clamber up over the next headland (which gives you a panoramic take on the expanse of Hat Sai Kaew) to reach Samet's smallest beach, the secluded **AO NUAN**. Although not brilliant for swimming, the rocky shore reveals a good patch of sand when the tide withdraws, and the more consistent beach at Ao Tub Tim is only five minutes' walk away. The best way to get to Ao Nuan from the pier is to take a **songthaew** from Na Dan for B20 per person (B150 when chartered).

The atmosphere here is relaxed and far less commercial than the other beaches, and the mellow restaurant of the friendly 🏃 *Ao Nuan* has some of the best veggie food on the island. Because it's some way off the main track, the beach gets hardly any through traffic and so feels quiet and private. The sturdy timber huts are idiosyncratic (④–⑤), each built to a slightly different design, and dotted across the slope that drops down to the bay; a few are built right over the beach. They're all spartanly furnished – the cheapest have just a mattress on the floor and a mosquito net, and all share bathrooms, but they all have fans and 24-hour electricity; price depends on the size and the location.

Ao Cho

A five-minute walk south along the track from Ao Nuan brings you to **AO CHO**, a fairly wide stretch of beach with just a few bungalow operations including one very large upmarket one, plus a pier, a minimarket and motorbikes for rent. Despite being long and partially shaded, this beach seems less popular than the others, so it may be a good place to try if you want a low-key atmosphere, or if the bungalows on other beaches are packed out. There's some coral off the end of the pier, and you can rent snorkelling gear on the beach. The easiest way to get to Ao Cho is to take a **boat** to Ao Wong Duan and then walk, or you could take the boat to Na Dan and then hang around for a songthaew (B30).

Wonderland (ⓣ038 644162; fan ②–⑤, air-con ⑥–⑧) has some of the cheapest **bungalows** on Ko Samet, though many of them are small and grotty; its nicest bungalows are on the hill above the restaurant at the northern end of the beach. The southern end of the bay is entirely dominated by the imposing air-con villas of the upscale *Ao Cho Grand View* (ⓣ038 644220, ⓦwww.grandviewgroup.net; ⑧), nearly all of which enjoy views north across the bay.

Ao Wong Duan

The horseshoe bay of **AO WONG DUAN**, round the next point, is Samet's second most popular beach after Hat Sai Kaew and though it's not as pretty and suffers even more from revving jet-skis and hordes of day-trippers on organized tours, it does offer some attractive accommodation, much of it significantly better looked after than the Hat Sai Kaew equivalents. Rooms are not cheap here though, so most guests are either package tourists, Pattaya overnighters, or weekending Bangkokians – shoestring travellers aren't well catered for. Although the beach is fairly long and broad, the central shorefront is almost lost under a knot of bars and tourist shops, and the main stretch of beach nearly disappears at high tide. Facilities include minimarkets, motorbike rental, money exchange, Internet access, overseas telephone services and a police box. At least four direct **boats** a day should run from Na Dan to Wong Duan (see p.218 for details), and vice versa. Alternatively, take a boat to Na Dan, then a B30 ride in a songthaew (or a B200 taxi ride). Seven-person speedboats can be chartered from the Wong Duan pier to Ban Phe for B1000.

Accommodation

Blue Sky Bungalow ⓣ081 509 0547. Just a handful of pretty good bamboo and wooden bungalows – the cheapest on this beach – set up on the hill above the *Blue Sky Restaurant* at the north, rocky, end of the bay, with some good views and a more old-style feel to the bungalows. Rooms have fans, bathrooms and verandas. ⑤

Malibu Garden Resort ⓣ038 644020, ⓦwww.malibu-samet.com. Huge, rather soulless, package-oriented outfit which brings in many of its customers twice a day from Pattaya. The scores of white-washed concrete bungalows are set round a shady tropical garden with a small swimming pool. Though uninspiring, the rooms are decent enough and all come with air-con and TV. ⑦–⑧

Vong Deuan Resort ⓣ038 651777, ⓦwww.vongdeuan.com. Attractive, upmarket bungalows in various designs, including nice cottages with stained dark-wood exteriors, contemporary styled interiors and garden bathrooms. Bungalows are set around a pretty tropical garden and all have air-con and TV. ⑦–⑧

Vongduern Villa ⓣ038 652300, ⓦwww.vongduernvilla.com. Occupying a big chunk of the bay's southern end, this place has character, even if it's not quite pristine. There are various types and standards of room, though they're all upscale and air-con, ranging from whitewashed timber huts built on stilts and with picture windows, decks and modern furnishings to more minimalist versions kitted out with dark-wood floors and Japanese-style platform beds. There's an attractive restaurant deck jutting out over the water. ⑥–⑧

Ao Thian (Candlelight Beach) and Ao Lung Dum

AO THIAN ("Candlelight Beach"), and contiguous Ao Lung Dum display almost none of the commerce of Wong Duan, a couple of minutes' walk over the hill, though the lovely, scenic shorefront is fronted by an unbroken line of bungalows and little restaurants and the eponymous "candlelight" lighting is long gone. The narrow, white-sand bay is dotted with wave-smoothed rocks and partitioned by larger outcrops that create several distinct beaches; as it curves outwards to the south you get a great view of the island's east coast. The best way to get here is to take a boat from Ban Phe to Ao Wong Duan and then walk.

Towards the northern end, *Sang Thain Beach Resort* (Ⓣ038 644255, Ⓦwww.sangthain.com; ⑦) has very tasteful air-con timber chalets built up the hillside on a series of decks and steps – decor is navy-and-white chic and views, mostly featuring the sea, are pretty; it also has compact brick **bungalows** with big glass windows (though no real view) and comfy interiors up the northern slope. Further down the shore, the plain but decent bungalows belonging to *Candlelight Resort* (Ⓣ087 149 6139; fan ⑤, air-con ⑥) are strung out in a long line, with each one facing the water.

At its southern end, Ao Thian turns almost imperceptibly into **AO LUNG DUM**, where the laid-back *Apache* (Ⓣ081 452 9472; ④) offers basic fan huts all with sea view, mosquito nets and bathrooms. Nearby *Horizons* (Ⓣ089 914 5585; ⑤) has better, more modern bungalows staggered in a line up the hill, all with partial sea view: interiors are bright, bathrooms are attractive, there's 24-hour electricity and you get good discounts for stays of more than one night.

Ao Wai and Ao Kiu

A fifteen-minute walk along the coast path from Lung Dum brings you to **AO WAI**, a very pretty white-sand bay, partially shaded and a good size considering it supports just one (large) bungalow operation, *Sametville Resort* (Ⓣ038 651681, Ⓦwww.sametvilleresort.com; fan ⑤–⑥, air-con ⑦–⑨). Bungalows in all categories vary in quality, but you've plenty to choose from, especially during the week, when it's very quiet here; at weekends the place tends to fill up with Thai groups. There's a restaurant and Internet access on site. A chartered songthaew costs B400 from Na Dan or there's a daily boat here from Ban Phe (10am; B90) plus an extra one on Friday afternoons at 2pm, but call the resort to confirm. Over an hour's walk south of Ao Thian, via a track that begins behind *Vong Deuan Resort* on Ao Wong Duan and can be joined at the southern end of Ao Thian, the gorgeous little twin bays of **AO KIU** – Ao Kiu Na Nok on the east coast and Ao Kiu Na Nai on the west – are separated by just a few hundred metres of land. Both beaches are now the domain of the very posh, five-star, butler-service villa resort *Paradee Resort and Spa* (Ⓣ02 438 9771, Ⓦwww.samedresorts.com; published rates from B12,800, ⑨).

Ao Prao (Paradise Bay)

Across on the upper west coast, the rugged, rocky coastline only softens into beach once – at **AO PRAO**, also known as Paradise Bay, on the northwestern stretch, some 4km north of Ao Kiu Na Nai. This is Samet's most exclusive beach, dominated by two exceptionally elegant – and expensive – resorts, with only one slightly more affordable option available, though if you're spending top dollar, the beach in front of *Mooban Talay Resort* on Ao Noi Na has the edge. There's a dive centre on Ao Prao (see p.219) and activities also include boat tours and kayak rental. If you're only visiting for the day, the most direct route from the east-coast beaches is via the inland track from behind *Sea Breeze* on Ao Phai, which takes about twenty minutes on foot, though the track from the back of *Tub Tim* on Ao Tub Tim will also get you there. If staying on Ao Prao, your hotel will arrange **boat** transfers from Ban Phe's private Sri Ban Phe pier (4 daily at 8am, 11am, 1.30pm & 4pm), or you can come by songthaew from Na Dan for B30 per person, or B200 on charter.

Ao Prao Resort (Ⓣ038 644100, Ⓦwww.samedresorts.com; ⑨) boasts some of the most luxurious **accommodation** on the island, with comfortable wooden chalets set in a mature tropical garden that slopes down to the beach. All chalets have air-con, TVs and balconies overlooking the sea and there's also a serenely sited restaurant that juts out over the water. The even more indulgent *Le Vimarn Cottages* (ⓣ038 644104, ⓦwww.samedresorts.com; ⑨) is owned by the same company and comprises charming and gorgeously furnished cottages, a delightful spa and a swimming pool; prices start from B8800. *Lima Coco* (ⓣ089 105 7080, ⓦwww.limacoco.com; ⑧–⑨) is a younger, trendier, cheaper and altogether less snooty place, with a Bangkok contemporary chic look and lots of white walls, brightly coloured cushions, day beds and decks. Rooms are built up the side of the hill, with the priciest ones enjoying front-row sea views. Rates include transfer from Chok Kitsada pier in Ban Phe.

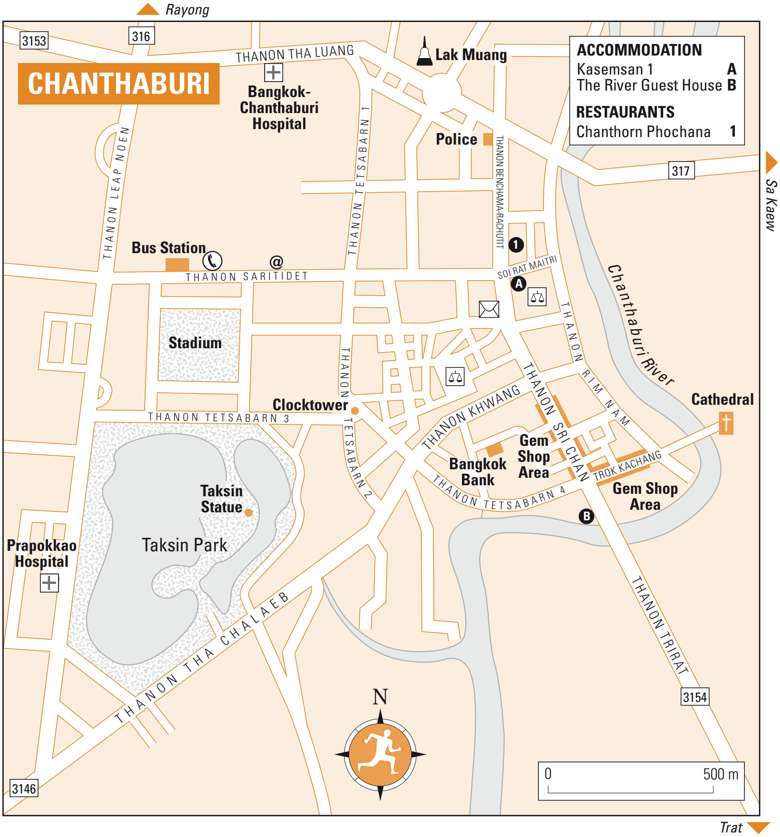
Ao Noi Na

West of Na Dan, the island's north coast – known simply as **AO NOI NA** even though it's not strictly a single bay – has a refreshingly normal village feel about it compared to the rest of Samet. There are a few places to stay along here and several restaurants, but the road is quiet and shrub-lined, terminating at a beautiful beach at the far western end, and the views across the water to the hills behind Ban Phe are beautiful. The white-sand beach at the end has been hogged by the luxurious *Mooban Talay Resort* but it's not private and you can walk there from Na Dan pier in about 25 minutes. En route you'll pass several good **restaurants**, including two floating seafood places where diners have to ring a bell on the shore to alert the boatman to come over and pick them up; *Ploy Samed Restaurant* is cheaper than *Mook Samet* and the food just as good: rock lobster is a speciality, and you eat on a deck at low tables with your feet dangling above the water. Another ten minutes walk further, just before *Samed Cliff Resort,* the unsigned but locally famous little *Pee Soon's* restaurant (daily till 8.30pm) is very popular in the neighbourhood, has an English menu and serves good, cheap Thai food, especially chicken with sweet basil.

Less than fifteen minutes walk from Na Dan, Scottish-run *Baan Pou Paan* (ⓣ038 644095, ⓔlizziecj@hotmail.com; fan ⑤, air-con ⑥) is a chilled-out **guest house** offering three en-suite fan and air-con bungalows built on stilts in the sea, with large decks and great views, plus another three air-con rooms on shore, all furnished with cushions, lamps and lots of plants. There's a restaurant and large seating area here too, plus table tennis and tiny beaches to either side. Ten minutes walk further west, the good-value *Samed Cliff Resort* (ⓣ038 644044, ⓦwww.samedcliff.com; ⑦) has air-con chalets stepped up the hillside, all with sea view, overlooking a well-kept lawn and shrub-lined paths, plus a narrow beach out front. It also has a small pool. The poshest place on Ao Noi Na is *Mooban Talay Resort* (ⓣ038 644251, ⓦwww.moobantalay.com; ⑨), a secluded haven at the end of the road set under the trees on a gorgeous – and quiet – white-sand beach. Accommodation is in large, attractive bungalows, all with platform beds, garden bathrooms and outdoor seating: the priciest, seafront ones have enormous decks, and there's a beachfront pool.

Chanthaburi

For over five hundred years, the seams of rock rich in sapphires and rubies that streak the hills of eastern Thailand have drawn prospectors and traders of all nationalities to the provincial capital of **CHANTHABURI**, 80km east of Ban Phe. Many of these hopefuls established permanent homes in the town, particularly the Shans from Burma, the Chinese and the Cambodians. Though the veins


Rayong
CHANTHABURI
ACCOMMODATION
Kasemsan 1 A
The River Guest House B
RESTAURANTS
Chanthorn Phochana 1
3153
316
317
3146
3154
THANON THA LUANG
Bangkok-Chanthaburi Hospital
Lak Muang
Police
THANON LEAP NOEN
THANON TETSABARN 1
THANON BENCHAMA-RACHUTIT
Bus Station
THANON SARITIDET
SOI RAT MAITRI
Stadium
THANON TETSABARN 3
Clocktower
THANON TETSABARN 2
THANON KHWANG
THANON SRI CHAN
THANON RIM NAM
Chanthaburi River
Cathedral
Gem Shop Area
Bangkok Bank
TROK KACHANG
Gem Shop Area
THANON TETSABARN 4
Taksin Statue
Taksin Park
Prapokkao Hospital
THANON THA CHALAEB
THANON TRIRAT
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500 m
Sa Kaew
Trat

of precious stones have now been all but exhausted, Chanthaburi's reputation as a gem centre has continued to thrive and this is still the most famous place in Thailand to trade in gems (most of them now imported from Sri Lanka and elsewhere), not least because Chanthaburi is as respected a cutting centre as Bangkok, and Thai lapidaries are considered among the most skilled – not to mention most affordable – in the world.

Chanthaburi's largest ethnic group are Catholic refugees from Vietnam, vast numbers of whom arrived here in the wake of the recurrent waves of religious persecution between the eighteenth century and the late 1970s. The French, too, have left their mark: during their occupation of Chanthaburi from 1893 to 1905, when they held the town hostage against the fulfilment of a territorial treaty on the Lao border, they undertook the restoration and enlargement of the town's Christian cathedral. This cultural diversity makes Chanthaburi an engaging place, even if there's less than a day's worth of sights here.

The Town

Built on the wiggly west bank of the Maenam Chanthaburi, the town fans out westwards for a couple of kilometres, though the most interesting parts are close to the river, in the district where there's most evidence of the **Vietnamese community**. Here, along Thanon Rim Nam, the narrow road running parallel to the river, the town presents a mixture of pastel-painted, colonial-style housefronts and traditional wooden shophouses, some with finely carved latticework.

Continuing south along this road, you'll reach a footbridge on the other side of which stands Thailand's largest **cathedral**: the Church of the Immaculate Conception. There's thought to have been a church on this site ever since the first Christians arrived in town in the eighteenth century, though the present structure was revamped in French style in the late nineteenth century. West of the bridge, the **gem dealers' quarter** begins, centred around Trok Kachang and Thanon Sri Chan (the latter signed in English as "Gem Street") and packed with dozens of gem shops. Most of the shops lie empty during the week, but on Fridays, Saturdays and

Overland into Cambodia via Aranyaprathet–Poipet and Chanthaburi province

The most commonly used **overland crossing into Cambodia** is at **Poipet**, which lies just across the border from the Thai town of **Aranyaprathet**. The border here is open daily from 7am to 8pm and officials will issue thirty-day Cambodian **visas on arrival** (see Basics p.32 for details, and ⓦwww.talesofasia.com/cambodia-overland-bkksr-self.htm for a very detailed description of the crossing and for advice on onward transport into Cambodia). Because this border crossing is so popular, formalities can take up to three hours, and once you're through, you face a gruelling journey of at least four hours in the back of a pick-up or, a much better but more expensive option, in a share-taxi, to cover the 150km of potholed road between Poipet and Siem Reap. If you need a **hotel** in Aranyaprathet, try either the comfortable fan and air-con rooms at *Inter Hotel* on Thanon Chatasingh (ⓣ037 231291; fan ③, air-con ④), or the cheaper *Aran Garden II* at 110 Thanon Rat Uthit (fan ②, air-con ③).

Travelling to Poipet from east-coast towns, the easiest route is to take a bus **from Chanthaburi** to the town of **Sa Kaew**, 130km to the northeast, and then change to one of the frequent buses for the 55-kilometre ride east to Aranyaprathet. **From Bangkok**, you can travel to Aranyaprathet by **train** (2 daily; 6hr), though you'll need to catch the 5.55am to ensure reaching the border before 5pm; the other leaves at 1.05pm. Return trains depart Aranyaprathet at 6.35am and 1.35pm. Tuk-tuks will take you the 4km from the train station to the border post. Alternatively, take a **bus** from Bangkok's Northern (Mo Chit) Bus Terminal to Aranyaprathet (at least hourly; 4hr 30min), then a tuk-tuk from the bus station to the border. The last Aranyaprathet–Bangkok bus leaves at 6pm. It's also possible to buy a **through ticket to Siem Reap** from Bangkok from almost any travel agent in Banglamphu for B400–600, but this option is dogged by **scams** (including a visa "service charge" scam, described in detail at ⓦwww.talesofasia.com/cambodia-overland-bkksr-package.htm), can take up to ten hours longer than doing it independently, sometimes travels via the less convenient Pailin or O'Smach border crossings instead, and nearly always uses clapped out buses or even pick-ups, despite the promised "luxury bus".

There are also two less-used crossings in **Chanthaburi province**, giving access to the Cambodian town of **Pailin**, just east of the border. Daung Lem Border Crossing at **Ban Laem** is 88km northeast of Chanthaburi and the Phsa Prom border crossing is at **Ban Pakkard** (aka Chong Phakkat), 72km northeast of Chanthaburi. There's a share-taxi service in the morning from Chanthaburi (next to the Bangkok Bank) to Ban Pakkard (1hr; B110), or you can take a songthaew from Chanthaburi to **Pong Nam Ron**, 42km north of Chanthaburi on Highway 317 (90 mins), then charter another to either border pass. The borders are open daily from 7am to 8pm; at the time of writing you can get **visas on arrival** only at Ban Pakkard.

Sunday mornings they come alive as local dealers arrive to sift through mounds of tiny coloured stones, peering at them through microscopes and classifying them for resale to the hundreds of buyers who drive down from Bangkok.

Chanthaburi has a reputation for high-grade fruit too, notably durian, rambutan and mangosteen, all grown in the orchards around the town and sold in the daily **market**, a couple of blocks northwest of the gem quarter. Basketware products made from woven reeds are also a good buy here, mostly made by the Vietnamese.

West of the market and gem quarter, the landscaped **Taksin Park** is the town's recreation area and memorial to King Taksin of Thonburi, the general who reunited Thailand between 1767 and 1782 after the sacking of Ayutthaya by the Burmese. Chanthaburi was the last Burmese bastion on the east coast – when Taksin took the town he effectively regained control of the whole country. The park's heroic bronze statue of Taksin is featured on the back of the B20 note.

Practicalities

Even if you're not planning a visit to Chanthaburi, you may find yourself stranded here for a couple of hours between **buses**, as this is a major transit point for east-coast services (including most Rayong–Trat buses) and a handy terminus for buses to and from the northeast. Eight daily buses make the scenic six-hour Chanthaburi–Sa Kaew–Khorat journey in both directions, with Sa Kaew being a useful interchange for buses to **Aranyaprathet and the Cambodian border** (see box on p.229 for details of this border-crossing and two other crossings in Chanthaburi province). Buses to and from all these places, as well as Bangkok's Eastern (Ekamai) and Northern (Mo Chit) stations, use the Chanthaburi **bus station** (Ⓣ039 311299) on Thanon Saritidet, about 750m northwest of the town centre and market. There are several **banks** with ATMs on Thanon Khwang, and **Internet** centres on Thanon Saritidet and Thanon Tetsabarn 2. The best **hospital** in town is the private Bangkok-Chanthaburi Hospital at 25/14 Thanon Tha Luang (Ⓣ039 321222, Ⓦwww.bangkokchanthaburi.com) and the **police** are further east along the same road (Ⓣ039 311111).

The best-located **accommodation** options are near the river. First choice should be the fan and air-con rooms at the modern, hotel-style *The River Guest House,* which is ideally sited by the river and on the edge of the gems quarter at 3/5–8 Thanon Sri Chan (Ⓣ039 328211; ③); it also serves very good food at its appealing waterside restaurant and has Internet access. Cheaper, but older and more faded is *Kasemsan 1* (Ⓣ & Ⓕ039 312340; fan ②, air-con ③), less than ten minutes' walk east of the bus station at 98/1 Thanon Benchama-Rachutit; choose between the sizeable, clean rooms with fan and bathroom on the noisy street side, and the similar but more expensive air-con ones in the quieter section. The most traveller-friendly **restaurant** in this area is *Chanthorn Phochana*, just north of the Saritidet intersection on Thanon Benchama-Rachutit, which has an English-language menu listing its mouthwatering range of spicy *yam* salads, curries and stir-fries; the restaurant also has a decent vegetarian section and features local Chateau de Klaeng wine. Otherwise, check out the foodstalls in the market and along the riverside soi for Vietnamese spring rolls (*cha gio*) served with sweet sauce, and for the locally made Chanthaburi rice noodles (*kway tiaw Chanthaburi*).

Trat and around

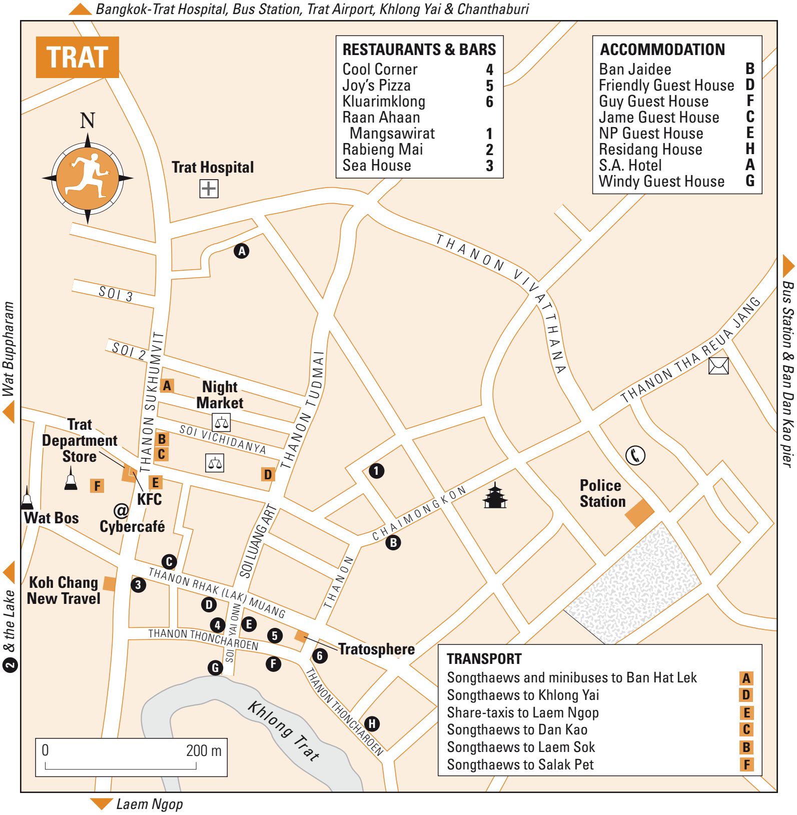
Most travellers who find themselves in or around the provincial capital of **Trat** are heading either for Ko Chang and the outer islands, via the nearby port at

Laem Ngop, or for Cambodia, via the border at **Hat Lek**, 91km southeast of town. But Trat itself has a definite charm and lots of welcoming guest houses to tempt you into staying longer, so it's no great hardship to be stuck here between connections.

Trat

The small and pleasantly unhurried market town of **TRAT**, 68km east of Chanthaburi, is the perfect place to stock up on essentials, extend your visa or simply take a break before striking out for Ko Chang, the outer islands or Cambodia. Though there are no real sights in town, the historic neighbourhood down by Khlong Trat, where you'll find most of the guest houses and traveller-oriented restaurants, is full of characterful old wooden shophouses and narrow, atmospheric sois. The covered market in the heart of town is another fun place to wander, though for focused explorations rent a bicycle and ride out to the attractively ornate seventeenth-century Wat Buppharam, 2km west of Trat Department Store, and the nearby lake.

Trat is famous across Thailand for the **yellow herbal oil** mixture, *yaa luang*, invented by one of its residents, Mae Ang Ki, and used by Thais to treat many ailments: sniff it for travel sickness or rub it on to relieve mosquito and sandfly bites,


Bangkok-Trat Hospital, Bus Station, Trat Airport, Khlong Yai & Chanthaburi
TRAT
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Trat Hospital
A
SOI 3
SOI 2
THANON SUKHUMVIT
A
Night Market
SOI VICHIDANYA
THANON TUDMAI
THANON VIVATTHANA
THANON THA REUA JANG
Bus Station & Ban Dan Kao pier
Wat Buppharam
Trat Department Store
B
C
D
E
F
KFC
Wat Bos
Cybercafé
1
CHAIMONGKON
B
Police Station
Koh Chang New Travel
3
C
THANON RHAK (LAK) MUANG
SOI LUANG ART
THANON
D
4
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SOI YAI ONN
THANON THONCHAROEN
6
Tratosphere
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THANON THONCHAROEN
H
Khlong Trat
2 & the Lake
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Laem Ngop

RESTAURANTS & BARS	
Cool Corner	4
Joy's Pizza	5
Kluarimklong	6
Raan Ahaan Mangsawirat	1
Rabieng Mai	2
Sea House	3

ACCOMMODATION	
Ban Jaidee	B
Friendly Guest House	D
Guy Guest House	F
Jame Guest House	C
NP Guest House	E
Residang House	H
S.A. Hotel	A
Windy Guest House	G

TRANSPORT	
Songthaews and minibuses to Ban Hat Lek	A
Songthaews to Khlong Yai	D
Share-taxis to Laem Ngop	E
Songthaews to Dan Kao	C
Songthaews to Laem Sok	B
Songthaews to Salak Pet	F

ease stomach cramps, or sterilize wounds. Ingredients include camphor and aloe vera. You can buy the oil in lip-gloss-size bottles at the market and at Tratosphere bookshop (B80–100); there are now several imitations, but Mae Ang Ki's original product has a tree logo to signify that it's made by royal appointment.

Arrival, transport and information

Trat is served by lots of **buses** from Bangkok's Eastern (Ekamai) Bus Terminal (5–6hr), and by some from Bangkok's Northern (Mo Chit) Bus Terminal as well (4hr 30min); a direct service from the capital's new Suvarnabhumi Airport is planned, and Trat also has useful bus connections with Ban Phe (for Ko Samet), Chanthaburi, Pattaya and Si Racha. All buses drop passengers at the bus station, 1.5km northeast of central Trat, on the Cambodia road (Highway 318), from where songthaews ferry passengers into the town centre (B20) or direct to **Laem Ngop** (for ferries to **Ko Chang** and the outer islands; B50). Minibuses to and from Hat Lek and the Cambodian border also leave from the bus station: see the box below for details.

You can also catch songthaews to Laem Ngop from Trat's town centre: they depart from the east side of Thanon Sukhumvit, near the covered market; for full details on getting to Laem Ngop see p.235 and for transport to Ko Chang see p.237. Songthaews direct to **Salak Pet** on Ko Chang (for Hat Sai Yao/Long Beach, see p.238) leave from the temple compound behind *KFC* and Trat Department Store. Share-taxis to **Laem Sok** (30min; B40), 30km south of Trat and the departure for speedboats to Ko Mak and Ko Kood, leave from near the covered market on Thanon Sukhumvit, as do share-taxis to **Ban Dan Kao** (10min), on the river estuary about 6km northeast of Trat town and the departure point for the slow boat to Ko Kood.

Tiny Trat **airport** (☎039 525767) is served by Bangkok Airways flights to and from Bangkok and Ko Samui. The airport is just 16km from the Ko Chang piers at

Overland into Cambodia via Hat Lek–Koh Kong

Many travellers use the **Hat Lek–Koh Kong border crossing** (daily 7am–8pm) for overland travel into Cambodia: **visas on arrival** are issued here (see Basics p.32) and Koh Kong has reasonable transport connections to Sihanoukville and, via Sre Ambel, Phnom Penh. For a comprehensive guide to the crossing and to the various transport options on both sides of the border, see ⓦwww.talesofasia.com/cambodia-overland-bkkpp.htm, and check the travellers' comment books at *Cool Corner* restaurant in Trat (see opposite).

The only way to get to **Hat Lek** is by minibus from Trat, 91km northwest. **Minibuses** leave Trat approximately every 45 minutes between 6am and 5pm (1hr–1hr 30min; B110) from near the market on Thanon Sukhumvit. In the reverse direction, the timetable is almost the same.

Hat Lek (on the Thai side) and Koh Kong (in Cambodia) are on opposite sides of the Dong Tong River estuary, but a bridge connects the two banks. Once through immigration, taxis ferry you into **Koh Kong** town for onward transport to Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh or for guest houses should you arrive too late for connections (mid-afternoon onwards). **Vans and share-taxis** to Phnom Penh take 7–11 hours, depending on the state of the road; the trip to Sihanoukville takes around the same time but you need to change in Sre Ambel. The alternative is to take the daily **speedboat** service to Sihanoukville (departs Koh Kong pier at 8am; 4hr), or to Sre Ambel (daily at 7am; 3hr) for road connections to Phnom Penh. However, though much faster, this can be a nerve-racking, even dangerous experience, especially in rough weather, as the boats used were built for river travel not open seas.

Laem Ngop and there's an airport shuttle direct to Ko Chang hotels for B270 per person, including ferry ticket. Trat town is a thirty-minute, B300 taxi ride from the airport. Note that when flying out of Trat, there's a B200 domestic departure tax because it's a private airport. The Bangkok Airways office (Ⓣ039 525299) is on the northern edge of town, just beyond the Highway 317 turn-off to Khlong Yai, across from the Bangkok-Trat Hospital, but you can also buy tickets at the travel agent in the town centre (see p.235).

Trat's official **TAT** office is in Laem Ngop (see p.235), but any guest house will help you out with local **information**. Alternatively, drop by the Tratosphere bookshop at 23 Soi Kluarimklong for tips from the knowledgeable French owner and a copy of his free Trat guide, or visit *Cool Corner* restaurant (see below) for a browse through the travellers' comment books.

Accommodation

Most **guest houses** in Trat are small, friendly and run by well-informed local people who are used to providing up-to-date information on transport to the islands, and the Cambodian border crossings. All the guest houses listed here are within ten minutes' walk of the songthaew stops on Thanon Sukhumvit.

Ban Jaidee 67 Thanon Chaimongkon Ⓣ039 520678, Ⓔbanjaidee@yahoo.co.uk. Very calm, inviting and rather stylish guest house with a pleasant seating area downstairs and just seven simple bedrooms upstairs. The nicest rooms are in the original building and have polished wood floors, though those in the modern extension are further from the traffic noise. All rooms share bathrooms. Internet access and bicycles available for guests. ①

Friendly Guest House 106–110 Thanon Rhak (Lak) Muang Ⓣ039 524053. Simple rooms in the extended home of a friendly family; all have windows and share bathrooms. ①

Guy Guest House 82 Thanon Thoncharoen Ⓣ039 524556, Ⓔguy.gh2001@gmail.com. Popular, commercial guest house that sweeps up a lot of travellers from the bus station. Rooms are well priced: many have private bathrooms and some have air-con. Internet access and a restaurant downstairs. Fan ①, fan and bathroom ②, air-con ②–③

Jame Guest House Thanon Rhak (Lak) Muang Ⓣ039 530458. Just a few pleasant fan rooms in a traditional wooden house, with a lounge area downstairs. Bathrooms are shared.①

NP Guest House 10 Soi Yai Onn Ⓣ039 512270. Welcoming place offering simple but decent enough rooms with shared bathrooms; not all of them have windows. ①

Residang House 87/1–2 Thanon Thoncharoen Ⓣ039 530103, Ⓦwww.trat-guesthouse.com. Comfortably appointed three-storey German-managed place that's more of a small hotel than a guest house. Rooms are large and clean and all have thick mattresses and fans; most have en-suite bathrooms. Internet access downstairs. Shared bathroom ①, en suite ②, air-con ③

S.A. Hotel Just off Thanon Sukhumvit Ⓣ039 524572, Ⓕ039 524411. Though hardly deluxe, the best hotel in town is set in a quiet spot and comprises large air-con rooms, all with bathrooms and French windows. ④

Windy Guest House 63 Thanon Thoncharoen Ⓣ089 707 9140. Tiny wooden house with a very laid-back atmosphere that's perfectly situated right on the khlong. There are just six simple rooms, all with windows and shared facilities. ①

Eating

Two of the best **places to eat** in Trat are at the covered day market on Thanon Sukhumvit, and the night market (5–9pm), between Soi Vichidanya and Soi Kasemsan, east of Thanon Sukhumvit.

Cool Corner 21–23 Thanon Thoncharoen, on the corner of Soi Yai Onn. Run almost single-handedly by a local writer/artist, this funky place has lots of personality, both in its cute blue-and-white decor, and in its traveller-oriented menu of home-made bread, real coffee, veggie specials and great Thai curries (from B60). A good place to while away an extra hour, listening to the mellow music and perusing the travellers' comment books on the islands and Cambodia.

Joy's Pizza Thanon Thoncharoen. Great range of fairly pricey home-made pizzas (from B170) served in a chilled-out dining area furnished with low tables and groovy artwork.

PEOPLE
C.E.O. GOAT
20
20

△ Fruit and veg at the night market, Trat

Kluarimklong Soi Kluarimklong. More Bangkok than Trat in its style and menu, this unexpectedly classy little place has both an indoor and a courtyard dining area and serves delicious, upmarket Thai food (dishes from B60). The main focus is on seafood, along with lots of spicy *yam* salads and *tom yum* soups.

Raan Ahaan Mangsawirat No English sign, but follow the soi near *Ban Jaidee*, off Thanon Chaimongkon. Typical no-frills, very cheap Thai vegetarian place, where you choose two portions of veggie curry, stir-fry or stew from the trays laid out in the display cabinet, and pay about B25 including rice. Shuts about 2pm.

Rabieng Mai beside the lake, south of Wat Bos, on the southwest corner of town. Mid-priced Thai seafood place whose lake views make it a good focus for a hike or cycle trip out to Wat Buppharam.

Sea House On the corner of Thanon Rhak (Lak) Muang and Thanon Sukhumvit. Standard range of Thai and farang food (most dishes B60–80), fresh coffees and beer.

Listings

Banks and exchange There are several banks along the central stretch of Thanon Sukhumvit.

Bookshops The French-Thai run Tratosphere, at 23 Soi Kluarimklong, buys and sells secondhand books and is a very good source of local info; you can also buy curios from all over Thailand here, and hammocks.

Emergencies For all emergencies, call the tourist police on the free, 24hr phone line ☎1155, or contact the local police station off Thanon Vivatthana ☎039 511239.

Hospital The best hospital is the private Bangkok-Trat Hospital ☎039 532735, emergencies ☎039 522555, part of the Bangkok Hospital group, which also offers dental care services; it's on the Sukhumvit Highway, 1km north of Trat Department Store.

Immigration office Located on the Trat–Laem Ngop road, 3km northeast of Laem Ngop pier (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm; ☎039 597261).

Internet access At many guest houses, at the hi-tech cybercafé on Thanon Sukhumvit, and at the CAT overseas telephone office on Thanon Vivatthana.

Mail At the GPO on Thanon Tha Reua Jang.

Massage Ask at Tratosphere, *Cool Corner*, or any guest house for advice on where to go for a massage treatment or lesson.

Telephones The CAT overseas telephone office is on Thanon Vivatthana on the eastern edge of town (daily 8.30am–4.30pm).

Travel agencies International and domestic flights can be booked at Koh Chang New Travel on Thanon Sukhumvit ☎081 687 1112 (closed Sun).

Laem Ngop

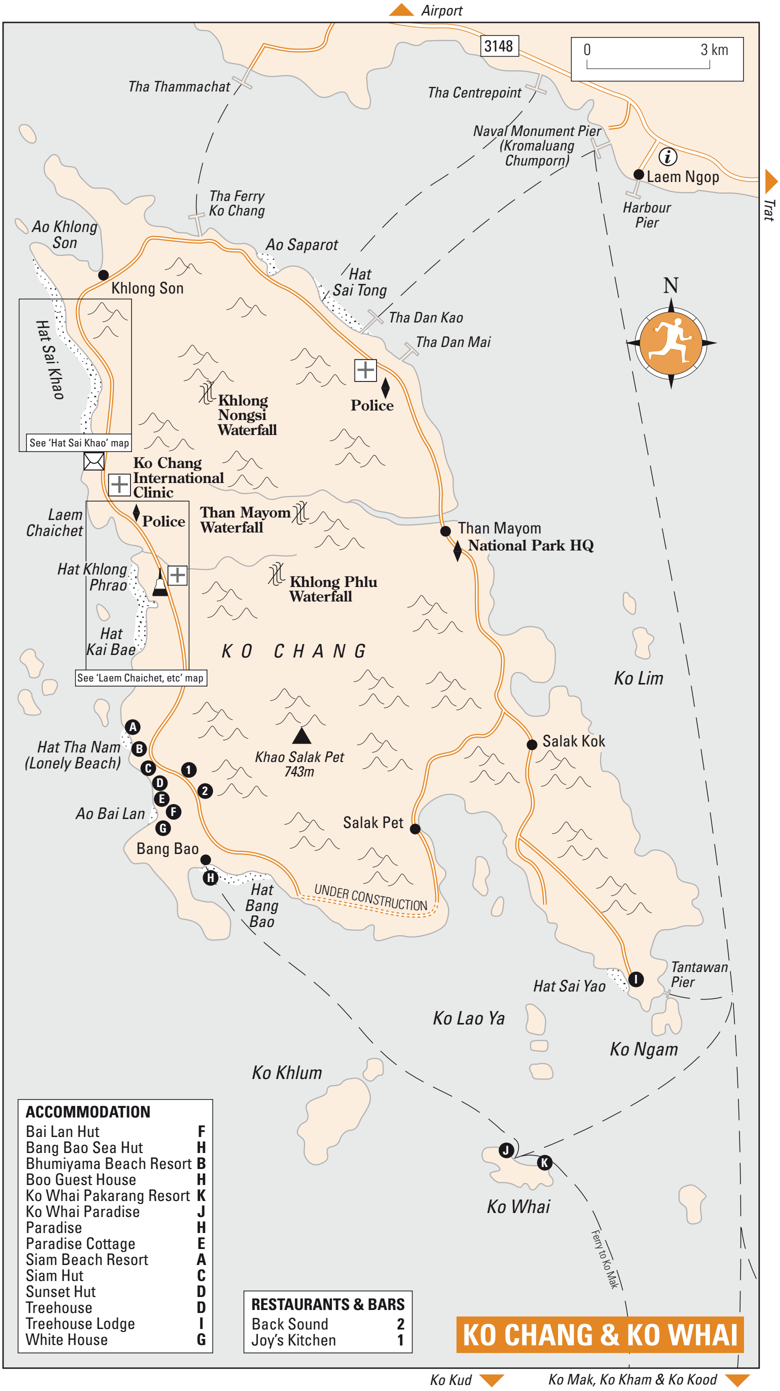
Ferries to Ko Chang and some boat services to the outer islands currently leave from four different piers west along the coast from the port of **LAEM NGOP** (sometimes signed as Ngop Cape), 17km southwest of Trat. There are a couple of morning **buses** direct to Laem Ngop's Centrepoint pier from Bangkok's Eastern (Ekamai) bus terminal (5hr 15min), but the usual way to get to Laem Ngop by public transport is by share-taxi (songthaew) from Trat (see p.232). **Songthaews** leave from Trat bus station and from the central stretch of Thanon Sukhumvit every half-hour or so, depending on boat departures and the time of day; rides can take anything from twenty to forty minutes, excluding the time taken to gather a full complement of passengers, so leave plenty of time to catch the boat. The usual songthaew fare is B30–50, depending on the number of passengers; if you board an empty songthaew you may find you've unwittingly chartered your own taxi for B100. Eight kilometres out of Trat, on the road to Laem Ngop, you'll pass though the village of **Ban Nam Chiao**, which is famous for its basketware items woven from bamboo and palm leaves, especially the emblematic conical rice-farmer's hat. Unless requested otherwise, songthaews will probably drop you at the tour agency near Laem Ngop's main passenger-ferry pier (for foot-passengers to Ko Chang, Ko Whai, Ko Mak and Ko Kham), which is known as the **Naval Monument Pier**, or **Tha Kromaluang Chumporn**. In addition to this pier there are two car-ferry piers for Ko Chang, **Tha Centrepoint** and **Tha Thammachat**, as well as the old **Harbour Pier**, near the TAT office, which is currently used by the Ko Kood Seatrans boats to Ko Mak and Ko Kood. For details of **boat services** from all these piers, see the relevant island accounts.

The Trat and Ko Chang **TAT office** (daily 8.30am–4.30pm; ☎039 597259, Ⓔtattrat@tat.or.th) is close by the old Harbour Pier, a 15-minute walk from the Monument Pier or B20 by motorbike taxi. It provides independent advice on the islands as well as current boat times (staff will also email you the latest schedules on request). You can change money at the Thai Farmers' Bank (usual banking hours), five minutes' walk back down the main road from TAT.

Ko Chang

The focal point of a national marine park archipelago of 52 islands, **KO CHANG** is Thailand's second-largest island (after Phuket). Measuring 30km north to south and 8km across, it's mainly characterized by a chain of long, white-sand beaches and a broad central spine of jungle-clad hills, the highest of which, **Khao Salak Pet**, tops 740m. Until fairly recently the domain of just a few thousand fishing families and the odd adventurous tourist, Ko Chang has seen massive development since 2001, with real estate going through the roof and the government pouring mega-bucks into the island, financing road-building projects and giving the green light to many new upmarket resorts. As a result Ko Chang is now very much a mainstream destination – with prices to match – even more popular with Thais than with foreign tourists, and in places still resembling a building site. Nonetheless, the hilly backbone and its waterfalls are protected as a national park, the island

KO CHANG & KO WHAI


Airport
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3 km
Tha Thammachat
Tha Centrepoint
Naval Monument Pier (Kromaluang Chumporn)
Laem Ngop
Trat
Harbour Pier
Tha Ferry Ko Chang
Ao Khlong Son
Ao Saparot
Hat Sai Tong
Tha Dan Kao
Tha Dan Mai
N
Khlong Son
Hat Sai Khao
See 'Hat Sai Khao' map
Khlong Nongsi Waterfall
Police
Ko Chang International Clinic
Laem Chaichet
Police
Than Mayom Waterfall
Than Mayom
National Park HQ
Hat Khlong Phrao
Khlong Phlu Waterfall
Hat Kai Bae
See 'Laem Chaichet, etc' map
KO CHANG
Ko Lim
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Hat Tha Nam (Lonely Beach)
Khao Salak Pet 743m
Salak Kok
Ao Bai Lan
Salak Pet
Bang Bao
Hat Bang Bao
UNDER CONSTRUCTION
Tantawan Pier
Hat Sai Yao
Ko Lao Ya
Ko Ngam
Ko Khlum
Ko Whai
Ferry to Ko Mak
Ko Kud
Ko Mak, Ko Kham & Ko Kood

ACCOMMODATION

Bai Lan Hut	F
Bang Bao Sea Hut	H
Bhumiyama Beach Resort	B
Boo Guest House	H
Ko Whai Pakarang Resort	K
Ko Whai Paradise	J
Paradise	H
Paradise Cottage	E
Siam Beach Resort	A
Siam Hut	C
Sunset Hut	D
Treehouse	D
Treehouse Lodge	I
White House	G

RESTAURANTS & BARS

Back Sound	2
Joy's Kitchen	1

is very nearly encircled by a good road, and it is still just about possible to find accommodation to suit most budgets.

Ko Chang's west coast has the prettiest **beaches** and is the most developed, with **Hat Sai Khao** (White Sand Beach) drawing the biggest crowds to its mainly upmarket and increasingly overpriced mid-range accommodation; smaller **Hat Kai Bae** is also pretty congested. Most backpackers opt for **Hat Tha Nam**, known as **Lonely Beach**, with its choice of fairly inexpensive beach huts and established party scene, while travellers in search of quiet choose the more laid-back **Ao Bai Lan** or the long, attractive sweep at **Hat Khlong Phrao**, which caters to all budgets. During **peak season**, accommodation on every beach tends to fill up very quickly, so it's often worth booking ahead; the island gets a lot quieter (and cheaper) from May to October, when fierce storms batter the huts and can make the sea too rough for swimming.

Transport to Ko Chang

All **boats** to Ko Chang depart from the Laem Ngop coast, about 17km southwest of the provincial capital of Trat. If you're coming by public transport from Pattaya, Ko Samet or Cambodia you'll need to travel via Trat first. Most buses from Bangkok also terminate in Trat, though a couple of morning ones from the Eastern Bus Terminal run direct to Laem Ngop's Centrepoint pier. If travelling via Trat airport, you can get a direct transfer to Laem Ngop, or across to your Ko Chang hotel; see p.233. Otherwise you could use one of the fast but cramped **tourist minibus** services that run direct to the Laem Ngop piers (most prices exclude ferry tickets) from Bangkok's Thanon Khao San (B180–350), Pattaya (B500 including ferry), and Ban Phe, near Ko Samet (B250).

Moving on from Ko Chang

Leaving Ko Chang, passenger boats run from Tha Dan Kao at every two hours between 6am and 6pm, though songthaew drivers will drop you at one of the piers for the more frequent car ferry services (hourly, 6am–7pm) if appropriate. Tickets for the daily **tourist minibuses** from Laem Ngop to Bangkok's Thanon Khao San, Ban Phe (for Ko Samet) and Pattaya are best bought from bungalows and tour agents on Ko Chang, but you should also be able to buy them once you've landed in Laem Ngop. Alternatively, hop on one of the public songthaews that meet the boats and make your onward travel arrangements in Trat. The Bangkok Airways minibus charges B270 per person all-in for its transfer from Ko Chang hotels **to Trat airport**; buses are timed to fit with the planes and can be booked through any tour agent on the island. A taxi from Laem Ngop to the airport in Bangkok costs B3500.

From about mid-November to May there are several ways of travelling from Ko Chang direct to the **outer islands**, though as timetables vary according to how busy things are, you need to check locally first; see relevant island accounts for more details. Tickets can be bought through tour agencies on nearly every Ko Chang beach, and there's usually a fee of about B50 for transfers to the Bang Bao pier. Bang Bao Boat (☎087 054 4300) offers daily boats from Bang Bao to **Ko Mak** (2hr 15min; B300) via **Ko Whai** (1hr; B200) with the possibility of an extension ticket for a speedboat transfer from Ko Mak to **Ko Kood** (extra 30min and B300). There's also a daily **speedboat** service (☎081 377 4074) from Bang Bao to Ko Kood's Ao Prao (1hr 50min; B900) via Ko Whai (15min; B350), Ko Mak (45min; B600) and Ko Kood's Khlong Chao (1hr 30min; B900). Another option is to make use of the daily **Thai Fun** snorkelling boat (see p.239), which runs day-trips from Ko Chang (B999), picking up passengers at the main Ko Chang beaches and making snorkelling stops, and passenger drops, at Ko Whai (B350 one-way), Ko Kham (B550) and Ko Mak (B550), with island pick-ups possible several days later if requested.

Three different ferry services run from Laem Ngop to Ko Chang, each departing from a different pier. **Passenger-only ferries** (☎039 597434) depart from the **Naval Monument Pier** (aka Tha Kromaluang Chumporn), a fifteen-minute walk from the Laem Ngop TAT office, but if coming by songthaew from Trat or tourist bus from Bangkok, Ko Samet or Pattaya, you will get dropped at the correct departure point. In all but the worst weather, these boats start running at 5.30am and then leave every two hours between 9am and 7pm, with extra ones occasionally slotted in for busy periods (B80, or B120 return; 45min). In bad weather you can travel on one of the car ferries, described below. The boats arrive at Tha Dan Kao on Ko Chang's northeast coast, from where **songthaews** (B40–80/person) transport passengers to the main beaches; to get to the more remote beaches you'll usually have to pay an extra fee, though some out-of-the-way bungalows send their own songthaew to meet the boats. If you are heading to Ko Chang's east coast, to Salak Pet, or to **Hat Sai Yao** (Long Beach), you can make use of the bargain B70 songthaew service that departs central Trat, behind the *KFC* (see map on p.231) and takes you all the way to Salak Pet, car-ferry passage included.

If you have your own car or motorbike, you need to use one of the **car ferries** that operate from two different piers further west along the Laem Ngop coast, both clearly signposted off the Trat–Laem Ngop road, but also accessible from Highway 3 should you want to bypass Trat. Because of fierce competition between the two ferry companies, timetables and prices change frequently, but from October to May there's at least one ferry an hour between 6am and 7pm in both directions; during the rest of the year there should be at least one every two hours. Expect to pay up to B150 per vehicle including driver, plus B30 per passenger. As the car ferries are more robust than the passenger ferries, they are a good option for foot-passengers during stormy weather: Trat songthaews will transport you to the car ferry piers on request and for an extra fee. Centrepoint Ferry (☎039 538196) runs ferries from Tha Centrepoint to Tha Dan Mai/Cabana (45min); and Ferry Ko Chang (☎039 597143) runs ferries from Tha Thammachat to Ao Saparot (25min).

Island practicalities

A wide road runs nearly all the way round the island, served by public **songthaews**, most frequent between Tha Dan Kao and Hat Kai Bae but often enough to be useful right down to Bang Bao; you can also rent cars and motorbikes on most beaches. The road can be dangerous in places, with steep hills and sharp, unexpected bends, so drive carefully – accidents are not uncommon.

Almost all the main beaches have roadside developments where you'll find **currency exchange** and ATMs, minimarkets, **Internet** access, clothes stalls and souvenir shops, as well as restaurants and bars. Most beaches have at least one dive shop (see box opposite) as well as kayak rental (B100/hr), and there's **elephant trekking** at Chang Chutiman, opposite the temple in Khlong Phrao (☎089 939 6676; B500/900 for a one/two-hour ride). Ko Chang Trekkers, who are based in Trat but pick up from Ko Chang beaches (☎089 164 7490) lead full-day and overnight **treks** into Ko Chang National Park (from B690–1540 per person, plus B200 National Park entry fee, minimum two people). Hat Sai Khao and Hat Kai Bae have the densest concentrations of facilities, which at Hat Sai Khao include two **pharmacies** and, to the south of the main development, a **post office.** The private 24hr **Ko Chang International Clinic** (☎039 551555 or 081 863 3609), part of the Bangkok Hospital Group, is located between Hat Sai Khao and Hat Kai Mook; it deals with minor injuries and has a dental service, and will transfer seriously ill patients to its parent Bangkok-Trat Hospital in Trat. Ko Chang's main

Diving and snorkelling in the Ko Chang archipelago

The **reefs** of the Ko Chang archipelago are nowhere near as spectacular as Andaman coast dive sites, and can get very crowded, but they're rewarding enough to make a day-trip worthwhile. Local **dive sites** range from the beginners' reefs at the Southern Pinnacle, with lots of soft corals, anemones, myriad reef fish and the occasional moray eel at depths of 4–6m, to the more challenging 31-metre dive off **Ko Rang**, where you're likely to see snapper – as well as a lot of other divers and snorkellers, this being the favoured destination of boats from Ko Mak and Ko Kood as well as Ko Chang. The best coral is found around the islets off Ko Mak (see p.250): in particular at Ko Rayang, Ko Kra and Ko Rang; the coral around Ko Yuak, off Ko Chang's Hat Kai Bae, is mostly dead, though some operators still sell trips there.

Dive shops on Ko Chang

The biggest concentration of dive shops is on Ko Chang, though there are dive shops on Ko Whai, Ko Mak and Ko Kood (see relevant accounts for details). Some **Ko Chang dive shops** have their main office in Bang Bao, where most boats depart, as well as a branch office or agent elsewhere on the island; those listed below are the main, established operators. All dive shops will organize pick-ups from any beach. See p.57 in Basics for a general introduction to diving in Thailand and for advice on what to look for in a dive centre. The nearest **recompression chambers** are around Pattaya (see p.215).

BB Divers Ⓣ086 155 6212, Ⓦwww.bbdivers.com. On the road at Bailan and Bang Bao.
Ko Chang Dive Point Ⓣ087 142 2948, Ⓔarnhelm@gmx.de. On Lonely Beach.
Ploy Scuba Diving Ⓣ039 558033 or 086 155 1331, Ⓦwww.ployscuba.com. At Hat Sai Khao, Hat Khlong Prao, Hat Kai Bae, Lonely Beach and Bang Bao.
Scubadive Thailand Ⓣ039 558028, Ⓦwww.scubadive-thailand.com. At Bang Bao.
Sea Horse Diving Ⓣ081 996 7147, Ⓦwww.ede.ch/seahorse. On Hat Kai Bae.
Water World Ⓣ086 139 1117, Ⓦwww.waterworldkohchang.com. Ko Chang Plaza, on the road at northern Hat Khlong Prao.

Trips and courses

Waves permitting, the dive shops run trips to reefs off Ko Chang's more sheltered east coast during the **monsoon season** from June to September, though visibility is unlikely to be very rewarding during this period. Prices for dive trips should include two dives, transport and lunch, and be in the range of B2200 to B2700 depending on the operator and the destination; accompanying snorkellers generally pay B700–800 including lunch and equipment. All dive centres also offer PADI or other internationally certificated **dive courses**: the introductory Discover Scuba averages B3200, the four-day Openwater B11,000, and the two-day Advanced B10,000.

Snorkelling and fishing

From about November to May, Thai Fun (Ⓣ081 003 4800) runs popular one-day **snorkelling cruises** to the outer islands with stops at reefs en route as well as at Ko Whai and Ko Mak and often at Ko Kham as well. The B999 price includes snorkel gear and buffet lunch; tickets can be booked through tour agencies on all beaches. The boat collects passengers from the main Ko Chang beaches and can also be used as a one-way or return transfer service to the islands (see p.237). There are all sorts of other locally run snorkelling and fishing trips organized by tour operators and bungalows across the island, typically charging B400 per person, including equipment.

police station is at Dan Mai on the northeast coast (ⓣ039 521657), and there are police boxes on Hat Sai Khao and at Hat Khlong Phrao's Ko Chang Plaza.

Though mosquitoes don't seem to be much in evidence, Ko Chang is one of the few areas of Thailand that's still considered to be **malarial**, so you may want to start taking your prophylactics before you get here, and bring repellent with you – refer to p.36 of Basics for more advice on this. Staff at the Ko Chang International Clinic, however, say that the risk to tourists is minimal and that cases are confined to those who work and stay overnight in the island's jungle interior. Sandflies can be more of a problem on the southern beaches and are best repelled by slathering yourself in coconut oil, though you can soothe your bites with locally made yellow oil (see p.231) or calamine. Watch out for **jellyfish**, which plague the west coast in April and May, and for **snakes**, including surprisingly common cobras, sunbathing on the overgrown paths into the interior. The other increasing hazard is **theft** from rooms and bungalows: use your own padlock on bags (and doors where possible) or, better still, make use of hotel safety boxes.

The free annual *Koh Chang Guidebook* and its website (ⓦwww.koh-chang.com) are a reasonable source of **information** and advertisements, and the website provides an accommodation-booking service, but for more intelligent insights and opinionated advice, check out ⓦwww.iamkohchang.com, compiled by a Ko Chang expat.

Hat Sai Khao (White Sand Beach)

Framed by a broad band of fine white sand at low tide, a fringe of casuarinas and palm trees and a backdrop of forested hills, **Hat Sai Khao** (White Sand Beach) is, at 2.5km long, the island's longest beach and its most commercial, with scores of upmarket hotel and bungalow operations squashed in between the road and the shore, plus dozens of shops, travel agents, bars and restaurants lining the inland side of the road. The vibe is more laid-back and traveller-oriented at the northern end of the beach, however, beyond *Yakah*, and this is where you'll find the most budget-priced accommodation, some of it pleasingly characterful and nearly all of it enjoying its own sea view. In addition, the road is well out of earshot of most of the bungalows up here, and there's hardly any passing pedestrian traffic, so it can be quite peaceful. Wherever you stay on Hat Sai Khao, be careful when swimming as the **currents** are very strong here and there's no lifeguard service.

Songthaews take about 25 minutes to drive from Tha Dan Kao to Hat Sai Khao and cost B40. If you want the bungalows at *Star Beach*, *Rock Sand* or *White Sand Beach Resort*, the songthaew might take you down the side-road to *White Sand,* but if not, get off as soon as you see the sign for *KC Grande*, and then walk along the beach. For bungalows further south, the songthaew should drop you right outside. During daylight hours it's easy to get songthaews to other beaches, including Hat Khlong Phrao (B30) and Hat Kai Bae (B40).

The road through Hat Sai Khao is lined with (low-rise) resort **facilities**, including banks and ATMs, motorbike and car rental, minimarkets, pharmacies, tour operators, dive shops (see p.239 for details), Internet and international phone centres, souvenir shops and tailors' outlets. The Ban Pu minimarket complex sells new and secondhand books. The post office is about 1km south of *Plaloma*, and beyond that is the **Ko Chang International Clinic** (see p.238).

Accommodation

Central and southern Hat Sai Khao are mainly the province of mid-range and upmarket **accommodation**, a lot of which charges above the odds for decent but unexceptional rooms. Most of the cheaper, better-value options are in northern Hat Sai Khao, though even here it's hard to find anything under ④ in high season.

Northern Hat Sai Khao

KC Grande Resort ⓣ081 833 1010, ⓦwww.kckohchang.com. One of the most popular "budget" places on Hat Sai Khao, *KC* has almost fifty very basic (though far from bargain-priced) bamboo huts that are strung out under the palm trees over a long stretch of beach so that each hut feels a little bit private and has a view of the sea. Huts all have mosquito nets and some have attached bathrooms. As well as the old-style huts, *KC* also offers much larger, more modern air-con bungalows set in landscaped gardens with a small pool. Huts, bungalows ⑧–⑨

Rock Sand Resort ⓣ039 551456, ⓔrocksand.beachresort@planet.nl. In the heart of the backpackers' stretch of beach, this place has just a handful of simple timber huts perched on cliffside ledges, with fan or air-con, plus some better air-con rooms, some with good views. Also has a beautifully sited, if pricey, deck-restaurant jutting high over the water. Fan ③, air-con ⑤

Star Beach ⓣ081 940 2195, ⓔstarbeach-bungalows@hotmail.com. A bit more basic than neighbouring sister outfit *Rock Sand*, and squatting in similarly limpet-like fashion on the rock-face, above the sand, this place also fosters a chilled-out travellers' vibe. It has just ten basic, en-suite plywood huts built into the cliff-face, some of which enjoy nice high-level sea views. ③

White Sand Beach Resort ⓣ081 863 7737. Ranged across a long, attractive stretch of uncommercialized beach at the far north end of the beach, *White Sand* offers a big range of nicely spaced huts, many of them lapping up uninterrupted sea views. Many of the huts are pretty basic affairs, though all have private bathrooms, but there are also some posher, sturdier ones. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑥–⑦

Central and southern Hat Sai Khao

15 Palms ⓣ039 551095. Unusually nice, well designed and fairly stylish beachfront bungalows, all with air-con. Also has a great sea-view lounge-bar complete with leather sofas, pool table and cable TV. ⑦

Arunee Resort ⓣ039 551075. Built in a row just across the road from the beach, the guest-house-style rooms here all have a small veranda, mattress, fan and en-suite bathroom and are a good price for Hat Sai Khao. ③

Bamboo Bungalow ⓣ081 945 4106. Pretty smart but pricey air-con bungalows built in a staggered line on the beach, so there is at least a partial sea view from every one. ⑦

Ban Pu Ko Chang Hotel ⓣ081 863 7314, ⓦwww.banpuresort.com. Upmarket accommodation comprising a low-rise hotel block and spacious wooden bungalows with unusual, open-roofed bathrooms built around a pretty tropical garden and a small swimming pool. All rooms have sea view, air-con, TV and a veranda. ⑧

Cookies Hotel ⓣ081 861 4227. Large, plain but good "superior" rooms in an unexciting block on the seafront, plus similar "standard" ones across the road, with picture-windows and big verandas but no sea views. ⑦–⑧

Fisherman Hill Resort Soi Kert Manee ⓣ081 429 3827. Friendly place ranged up the hillside about 200m off the road. It offers some of the cheapest rooms on Hat Sai Khao, in simple huts with fan and deck and shared bathroom, plus others with bathroom and some less good-value ones with air-con across the soi. A couple of huts have fabulous views of the jungle-encrusted mountains behind. Shared bathroom ②, fan and bathroom ④, air-con ⑦–⑧

Ko Chang Grand View Resort ⓣ081 863 7802, ⓦwww.grandviewthai.net. What sets this place apart from many others is the amount of space between most bungalows, many of which are set around either the shoreside garden, or, less scenically and more noisily, in a plot across the road. The beachfront garden drops down to a rocky part of the beach at the far southern end of the bay, but the sand is just a few steps away. The cheapest accommodation is in simple fan huts, with screens and thick mattresses and there are also concrete air-con bungalows and rooms. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑦–⑧

Ko Chang Lagoon ⓣ039 551201, ⓦwww.kohchanglagoonresort.com. Large, resort-style, two-storey hotel complex with comfortably furnished air-con rooms and huge two-storey bungalows right on the sand. Hotel ⑦, bungalows ⑦–⑧

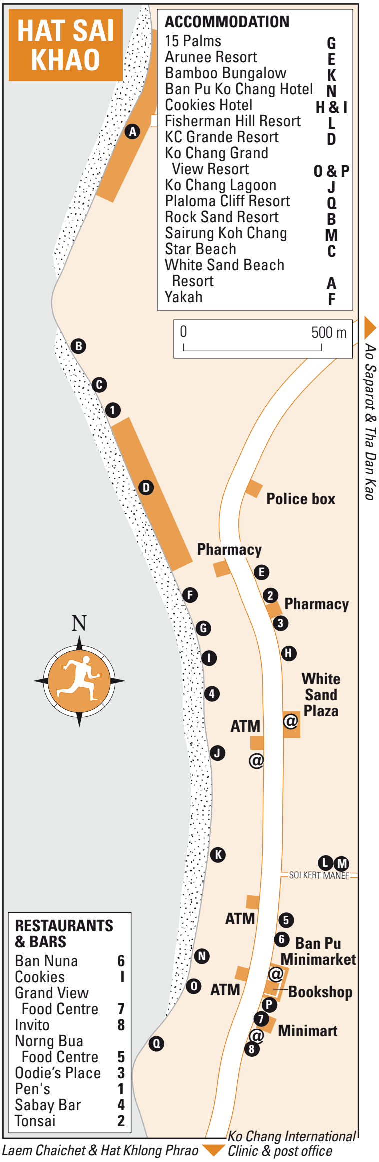
Plaloma Cliff Resort ⓣ081 863 1305, ⓦwww.plaloma-cliff.thai.li. Though the interiors of the fan and air-con rooms and bungalows here are unexceptional, the landscaping is spacious and pleasant plus there's a nice pool. Some rooms also have panoramic coastal views. There's no beach right here, at the far southern end of Hat Sai Khao, just rocks, but you can still swim, or walk a couple of hundred metres down to the sand beyond *Ko Chang Grand View*. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑦–⑧

Sairung Koh Chang Soi Kert Manee ⓣ039 5511177. Half a dozen bamboo bungalows with attached bathrooms staggered up the hillside about 250m off the road. Cheap for Hat Sai Khao. ③

Yakah ⓣ089 007 4326. Small collection of eleven teak-log bungalows right on the beach, all pretty nice inside and with air-con, TV, fridge and at least partial sea view. ⑥–⑦

Eating and drinking

All the bungalow operations on Hat Sai Khao have **restaurants**, most of which offer passable European food and standard Thai fare. As well as the listed beach **bars**, there's a more mellow cluster of little seafront options up on northern Hat Sai Khao, around *Rock Sand* and *Star Bungalows*, and, at the other extreme, a knot of brash, Pattaya-style bar-beers inland from *Plaloma Cliff Resort* in southern Hat Sai Khao.


HAT SAI KHAO
ACCOMMODATION
15 Palms G
Arunee Resort E
Bamboo Bungalow K
Ban Pu Ko Chang Hotel N
Cookies Hotel H & I
Fisherman Hill Resort L
KC Grande Resort D
Ko Chang Grand View Resort O & P
Ko Chang Lagoon J
Plaloma Cliff Resort Q
Rock Sand Resort B
Sairung Koh Chang M
Star Beach C
White Sand Beach Resort A
Yakah F
0 500 m
Ao Saparot & Tha Dan Kao
Police box
Pharmacy
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White Sand Plaza
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SOI KERT MANEE
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Ban Pu Minimarket
Bookshop
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RESTAURANTS & BARS
Ban Nuna 6
Cookies I
Grand View Food Centre 7
Invito 8
Norng Bua Food Centre 5
Oodie's Place 3
Pen's 1
Sabay Bar 4
Tonsai 2
Laem Chaichet & Hat Khlong Phrao
Ko Chang International Clinic & post office

Ban Nuna Specializes in mid-priced German food, as well as pizzas.

Cookies The nightly seafood barbecues are the attraction here. Make your selection from the neat piles of barracuda, shark, tuna, king prawns, crab and squid laid out on ice trays on the beach, decide how you'd like it served, and take your seat at the candlelit tables on the sand.

Grand View Food Centre Collection of hot-food stalls serving soups, noodles and Isaan specialities that's a hit with local shop-workers as much for its authentic taste as for its very cheap prices.

Invito Expensive but highly rated, authentic Italian food (from B300) including wood-fired pizzas, pastas and imported wines.

Norng Bua Food Centre Very cheap night-market-style Thai food, including noodle soups, fried noodles and satays.

Oodie's Place Live music most nights, daily movies, and a Euro-Asian menu with a French accent; most main dishes cost B60–200.

Pen's Tiny beachfront restaurant that serves exceptionally good home-style Thai food at fairly cheap prices.

Sabay Bar One of Ko Chang's longest-running institutions, where you can choose to sit in the chic air-con bar and watch the nightly live sets from the decent in-house cover band (from 9pm), or lounge outside on mats and cushions on the sand and just listen to the music via the outdoor speakers. You pay for the pleasure, however, as drinks are pricey. Also stages fire-juggling shows on the beach and full moon beach parties.

Tonsai The atmosphere at this predominantly vegetarian restaurant is pleasingly mellow: seating is on Thai-style cushions scattered around a circular platform wedged between half a dozen trees and the menu (B50–150) includes Thai curries, pastas, Vietnamese sausage and around fifty cocktails.

Laem Chaichet and Hat Khlong Phrao

Four kilometres south of Hat Sai Khao, the scenic, rocky cape at **LAEM CHAICHET** curves round into sweeping, casuarina-fringed **HAT KHLONG PHRAO**, one of Ko Chang's nicest beaches, not least because it has yet to see the clutter and claustrophobic development of both its neighbours. For the moment at least, most of the restaurants, bars and shops are secreted way off the beach along the roadside, with the beachfront left mainly to a decent spread of differently priced accommodation. At the northern end, **Laem Chaichet** protects an inlet and tiny harbour and offers beautiful views south across the bay and inland to the densely forested mountains behind. **Northern Hat Khlong Phrao** is a nice kilometre-long run of beach that ends at a wide khlong, Khlong Phlu, whose estuary is the site of some characterful stilt homes and seafood restaurants. At low tide you can just about wade across to **southern Hat Khlong Phrao**; more reliably, during daylight hours, you can rent your own kayak from almost anywhere along the beach, or make use of the boatman who ferries guests at *Aana Resort* to and from the resort's private little patch of sand behind *Thalé* bungalows. The 2.5-kilometre-long southern stretch is partly shaded by casuarinas and backed in places by a huge coconut grove that screens the beach from the road; the central area in particular has retained an appealingly mellow atmosphere despite the presence of several upmarket resorts alongside the two long-running traveller-oriented options.

As well as dividing northern Hat Khlong Phrao from southern Hat Khlong Phrao, Khlong Phlu's waters tumble into the island's most famous cascade, **Khlong Phlu Falls** (Nam Tok Khlong Phlu), a couple of kilometres east off the main road. Signs lead you inland to a car park and some hot-food stalls, where you pay your national park entry fee (B200, kids B100) and walk the final 500m to the 20-metre-high waterfall (best in the rainy season) that plunges into an invitingly clear pool defined by a ring of smooth rocks.

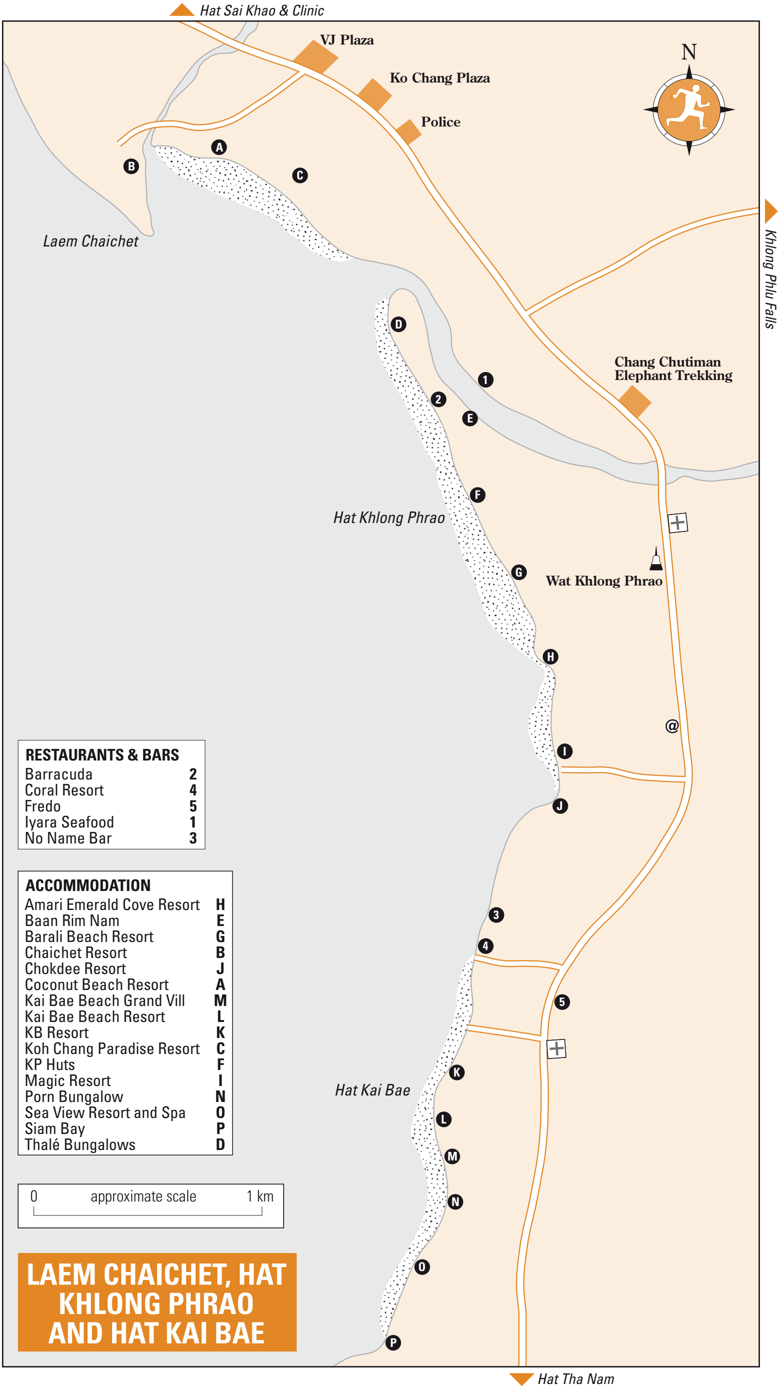
There are knots of development at intervals along the road, with one of the main clusters of **facilities** located inland from Laem Chaichet in a couple of plazas. Here you'll find a bank and ATM, car and motorbike rental, a supermarket, Internet acess, dive centres (see p.239), several little restaurants and shops and an amazing six different tailors' outlets. Ko Chang's **tourist police** also have an office here. Further south, inland from the *KP* access road, there's a **clinic** and a fuel station on the main road, across from the community temple, Wat Khlong Phrao. South again, on the main road inland from *Magic*, there's an Internet centre and a few bars, restaurants and tour operators, and it's only a few hundred metres' walk south of here to the start of the Kai Bae village amenities (see p.245). **Restaurants** worth making a special effort for include the beachfront-shack *Barracuda*, between *Thalé* and its over-the-top southern neighbour *Panviman Resort*, which serves especially good, mid-priced seafood; and, for its khlongside setting, the posh *Iyara* seafood restaurant, built on stilts over the estuary behind *Thalé*.

Songthaews take about ten minutes to reach Laem Chaichet and northern Hat Khlong Phrao from Hat Sai Khao (B30) or twenty minutes to far southern Hat Khlong Phrao, fifteen/five minutes from Hat Kai Bae, or 35/45 minutes from Tha Dan Kao.

Accommodation

There's a good spread of accommodation on Laem Chaichet and Hat Khlong Phrao, including some of the cheapest places to stay on the island, and one of the priciest, with several characterful options in between.

LAEM CHAICHET, HAT KHLONG PHRAO AND HAT KAI BAE


Hat Sai Khao & Clinic
VJ Plaza
Ko Chang Plaza
Police
N
Khlong Phlu Falls
Laem Chaichet
Chang Chutiman Elephant Trekking
Hat Khlong Phrao
Wat Khlong Phrao
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RESTAURANTS & BARS	
Barracuda	2
Coral Resort	4
Fredo	5
Iyara Seafood	1
No Name Bar	3

ACCOMMODATION	
Amari Emerald Cove Resort	H
Baan Rim Nam	E
Barali Beach Resort	G
Chaichet Resort	B
Chokdee Resort	J
Coconut Beach Resort	A
Kai Bae Beach Grand Vill	M
Kai Bae Beach Resort	L
KB Resort	K
Koh Chang Paradise Resort	C
KP Huts	F
Magic Resort	I
Porn Bungalow	N
Sea View Resort and Spa	O
Siam Bay	P
Thalé Bungalows	D

Laem Chaichet and northern Hat Khlong Phrao

Chaichet Resort ⓣ039 551070, ⓦwww.kochangchaichet.com. Overlooking the scenic little harbour at the northern, Laem Chaichet, end of the bay, with impressively long views down Hat Khlong Phrao, this place offers a range of options, including large, comfortable air-con bungalows whose decks give out onto the northern coast of the cape and whose design evokes that of a ship, complete with porthole-style windows and hull-shaped roofs. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑥

Coconut Beach Resort ⓣ039 551273, ⓦwww.webseiten.thai.li/coconut. Sprawling place that occupies a large area stretching from the roadside down to the shore. Choose between staying amongst the row upon row of seafront accommodation – in either a simple or mid-range wooden hut or in a concrete version with air-con and TV – or opt for one of the enormous super-plush VIP Thai-style bungalows set round the swimming pool. Some bungalows in all categories have direct sea views. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑦, VIP ⑧

Koh Chang Paradise Resort ⓣ039 551100, ⓦwww.kohchangparadise.com. This huge patch of land between the road and the shore is filled with large concrete bungalows, all of them fronted by big glass windows and featuring comfortable, hotel-style, air-con interiors. Some also have indoor-outdoor bathrooms and full sea views. ⑧

Southern Hat Khlong Phrao

Amari Emerald Cove Resort ⓣ039 552000, ⓦwww.amari.com. The poshest place on Khlong Phrao occupies a lovely tranquil spot, complete with its own palm-shaded sandy terrace and seafront swimming pool. Rooms are in low-rise three-storey blocks set around the pool, tropical garden and lagoons, and are typical deluxe style, with wooden floors and balconies. ⑨

Baan Rim Nam ⓣ087 005 8575, ⓦwww.iamkohchang.com. Charming, idiosyncratic converted fishing family's house, built on stilts over the khlong at the end of a walkway through the mangroves. Run by a British-Thai couple, it has just three comfortable, stylishly furnished air-con rooms with good bathrooms, plus a deck area for lounging but no restaurant. You can borrow kayaks and it's a couple of minutes' walk to the beach and *Barracuda* restaurant. ⑤

Barali Beach Resort ⓣ039 557238, ⓦwww.baraliresort.com. One of the more elegant spots on the beach, with forty tastefully designed, Balinese-style rooms, furnished with four-poster beds, sunken baths and lots of polished wood, and set around a beachfront tropical garden with an infinity-edge swimming pool. ⑨

Chokdee Resort ⓣ081 910 9052, ⓔchokdeeresort_kc@yahoo.com. Sitting astride the rocky promontory at the far southern end of Hat Khlong Phrao, but within a couple of hops of the sand around neighbouring *Magic* and next-door-but-one *Amari*, the concrete bungalows here are reasonable value if uninspired. Nearly all of them have a sea view and the price depends on whether or not you want air-con. Fan ④, air-con ⑥

KP Huts ⓣ084 099 5100. Very much traveller-oriented, this popular spot has fifty fairly simple wooden huts attractively scattered through a large shoreside coconut grove with plenty of sea views. Even some of the simplest versions (with shared bathrooms) are right on the shore, and a few are raised high on stilts for an extra-seductive panorama. There are also larger en-suite huts, some of which are designed for families. All rooms have fans and there's 24-hour electricity. The management rents out motorbikes and kayaks, and organizes snorkelling and fishing day-trips. Shared bathroom ②–③, en suite ④

Magic Resort ⓣ039 557074. Bungalows here are widely spaced around a shorefront garden at the far southern end of the bay: choose between timber huts with fan, or air-con concrete versions. It also has a gorgeously sited restaurant that sits right over the water. Fan ④, air-con ⑥

Thalé Bungalows ⓣ081 926 3843. The entire northern stretch of southern Hat Khlong Phrao is occupied by the primitive wooden-plank huts of the determinedly old-style *Thalé,* whose land runs right up to the khlong. This is one of the cheapest places to stay on Ko Chang: none of the huts have private bathrooms, but all have mosquito nets and some have a deck too. ②

Hat Kai Bae

South around the headland from *Chokdee*, narrow, pretty little **HAT KAI BAE** (see map opposite) presents a classic picture of white sand, pale blue water and overhanging palms, but the shorefront is very slender indeed – and filled with bungalows – and the beach disappears entirely at high tide. The widest stretch of beach is in front of *KB Resort*, and there's also the option of kayaking across to the sandy shore at Ko Man Nai, the island that sits less than a thirty-minute paddle offshore from *Siam Bay*.

You should have no problem getting a **songthaew** to Kai Bae from Tha Dan Kao (50min; B60) or Hat Sai Khao (25min; B40). Several places on Hat Kai Bae rent out motorbikes, kayaks and boats and there are dive shops here (see p.239) as well as beachfront Internet access at *Kai Bae Beach Resort*. The roadside development is full of small shops, ATMs, currency exchange, second hand book outlets, Internet access and restaurants, and there's also a **clinic/pharmacy** (evenings only).

Accommodation and eating

All the Kai Bae bungalows have restaurants, and some of the best **food** on the beach is served up by *Coral Resort*, whose restaurant occupies a gorgeous breezy spot on the coral rocks. The menu includes specialities from Isaan like *som tam* and minced pork *larb*, as well as Thai curries and consistently good barbecued seafood, not to mention decent pizzas. Away from the beach, on the main road, between the access road to *Kai Bae Hut* and the one to *Coral*, you'll find the recommended French restaurant *Fredo*, and a number of cheap Thai noodle restaurants and *som tam* shops. For a **beer** with a sea view, you could do worse than drop in at the ultra-laid-back *No Name Bar*, a few metres north along the shore from *Coral*.

Kai Bae Beach Grand Vill ⓣ081 940 9420, ⓦwww.kaibaegrandvill.com. All the accommodation here is plainly furnished, with the best-value options being the fan-cooled timber bungalows on the shorefront, most of which enjoy direct sea views, and some of which sleep four people. Rooms in the small hotel block at the back have air-con and are quite a bit pricier. Fan ④–⑤, air-con ⑦

Kai Bae Beach Resort ⓣ081 917 7704. This place has lots of bungalows stretching over a biggish patch of the seafront: choose between comfortable wooden ones with fan and bathroom, many with sea view, and elegant deluxe air-con versions, many set around the garden. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑦

KB Resort ⓣ039 557125, ⓦwww.kbresort.com. Attractive, upmarket place whose poshest bungalows, many of them on the seafront, have huge glass windows, air-con, TV and comfy interiors (though not much privacy). The cheaper fan versions are similar but don't have the big windows. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑦–⑧

Porn Bungalow ⓣ089 099 8757. Laid-back, long-running travellers' hangout that's the main cheap place to stay on this beach. It has both old-style bamboo huts – many of them right on the seafront – with fans, mozzie nets and shared facilities, as well as a range of more comfortable en-suite wooden bungalows, also with nets and fans. There's also an attractive shoreside eating area full of cushions and low tables, and a bar. Shared bathroom ②, en suite ③–⑤

Sea View Resort and Spa ⓣ039 551153, ⓦwww.seaviewkohchang.com. The most upmarket place on the beach, *Sea View* is set around a lawn and tropical flower garden and has a table-tennis table under the palm trees, a swimming pool and spa, and a currency exchange desk. The air-con hotel rooms and bungalows are large, light and airy, and fairly luxuriously furnished; all of them have decks or verandas and some have garden bathrooms. Price mainly depends on the view. ⑦–⑨

Siam Bay ⓣ081 859 5529. Set right at the southern end of the beach, *Siam Bay* has a beautifully sited restaurant and swimming pool overlooking the rocks, plus standard mid-range air-con bungalows on the hillside and pricier, more modern contemporary ones on the shore. Hillside ⑥, shorefront ⑦

Hat Tha Nam (Lonely Beach)

HAT THA NAM – dubbed **Lonely Beach** before it became the backpackers' choice spot, and still known as such – is one of the nicest beaches on the island. The kilometre-long curve of white-sand bay is broad even at high tide and bungalow developments are set at a decent distance from the shoreline. Be extremely careful when swimming here, however, especially around *Siam Beach* at the northern end, as the steep shelf and dangerous current result in a sobering number of

drownings every year – twenty in 2003; do your swimming further south and don't go out at all when the waves are high.

Nearly all the accommodation on Hat Tha Nam is aimed at budget travellers, so prices are among the cheapest on Ko Chang. The youthful crowd means this is also the island's main party beach: though there are just a handful of **bars**, they crank it up loud and late, so this is not the beach to head for if you want to be lulled to sleep by the sounds of the sea. Across the road from *Paradise Cottages*, *Back Sound* is the biggest bar, hosting regular Red-Bull-and-vodka-bucket parties and playing mainly house music. *Joy's Kitchen*, a short walk north up the road, near the *Treehouse* access road, is a good place to line your stomach first. There's a dive shop on the beach (see p.239), kayak and motorbike rental at most bungalows, and Internet access at *Siam Beach* and on the road. **Songthaews** from Tha Dan Kao take about an hour to Hat Tha Nam and cost B80.

Accommodation

Bhumiyama Beach Resort Central beach area ☎081 860 4623, Ⓦwww.bhumiyama.com. The poshest place on the beach has just 45 attractively furnished rooms, in deluxe two-storey bungalows and cottage wings. The most expensive have sea views from their picture windows, and all have air-con and use of the pool. ⑧–⑨

Paradise Cottage Beyond the southernmost end of Lonely Beach, ☎039 558122. Though the 32 en-suite woven-bamboo and thatch huts here are fairly simple they are also in good condition, look almost chic, and all have fans, 24-hour electricity, and mozzie nets. The slightly more expensive ones have sea view from their decks; the others are enveloped by banana trees in the jungle-garden. The huge communal wooden deck – for lounging, eating and horizon-gazing – is the focus of the place; there's no sand here, just rocks, though sandy Lonely Beach is just a few minutes' walk to the north. ②–③, sea view ③–④

Siam Beach Resort At the far north end of the beach ☎089 161 6664. Simple, decent enough bungalows with fan and bathroom, many of them on the beach, plus other air-con ones set back from the shore up the hillside. Fan ④, air-con ⑤

Siam Hut Central beach area ☎086 609 7772. Rows and rows of cheap, primitive, split-bamboo huts – ninety in total – all of them en suite and with mattresses and mozzie nets. It's first come, first served for the prime seafront locations. ②

Sunset Hut Beyond *Treehouse* at the far southern end of the beach ☎081 818 7042. Posh concrete en-suite bungalows with proper beds and big glass windows – and some also have seafront decks – plus some old-style huts with shared bathrooms. It also has a good restaurant with lots of veggie options, and a bar. Shared bathroom ②, en suite ④

Treehouse Southern end of the beach ☎081 847 8215. Set on the rocky headland at the southern end of the bay, this German-Thai-managed place is the one that put this beach on the map and is the most chilled and characterful spot on Hat Tha Nam. However, the landowner is set to take the place back in the near future, so call to check first – or head straight for the genuinely lonely new branch of *Treehouse*, on Hat Sai Yao (see p.249). Until they're knocked down, accommodation here is in the cute, trademark, shaggy-thatched huts, each one simply furnished with a mattress, a mosquito net and a paraffin lamp (there's no electricity in the huts, so no fans either), and all of them with shared bathrooms. There's an inviting seaside deck-restaurant and bar, with hammocks and floor cushions. Also has a book exchange. ①–②

Ao Bai Lan

About one kilometre south of Hat Tha Nam (15 minutes' walk along the road and over the hill), **AO BAI LAN** accommodates the non-partying refugees from Lonely Beach – though *Bai Lan Hut* has its own chilled out jazz and blues bar set over the water, *Net n' Hook*, whose tag-line is "Jazz your mind, blues your soul". There's no beach here, just rocks, reef, and invitingly clear water, but you can still swim, snorkel and fish. The vibe at the longest-running place here, *Bai Lan Hut* (☎087 028 0796, Ⓔbailanhut2002@hotmail.com; ①–②), is ultra-laid-back. It comprises sixteen no-frills huts, many of them on stilts, some of them right beside the sea, others in the palm-filled garden, plus a lovely seating and eating area, decorated with shell-and-driftwood artwork, on a deck that extends right over the water; it's often closed between June and October, so phone first to check. The restaurant here, *Miss Naughty's*, is run by the owner-chef who studied Italian and Thai cuisine and will give cooking classes if asked. Sharing the rocky bay, the *White House* (Ⓣ039 558114; ❺–❻) has some dinky, quite stylish, contemporary all-white villas set round a swimming pool, all with partial sea view, plus rooms in a block at the back; all have air-con. The roadside village at Bai Lan has Internet access and a dive shop (see p.239). **Songthaews** from Tha Dan Kao take about an hour to Ao Bai Lan and cost B80.

Bang Bao village and Hat Bang Bao

Picturesque **BANG BAO VILLAGE**, about 4km south of Ao Bai Lan on Ko Chang's southern coast, is a popular and enjoyable focus for organized day-trips around Ko Chang, and is the departure point for snorkelling and diving trips and boat transfers to the outer islands. The village is built on stilts off one long jetty that extends out into the sheltered fishing harbour and is full of tourist-oriented seafood **restaurants**, including the highly regarded *The Bay*; dive shops (see box on p.239 for diving information); and tour operators like Jer Poo Dee Banyang, who run snorkelling trips (B600/person) and **night-fishing** expeditions (Nov–end April; 6pm–1am; B500 including barbecue). It also has a local health-care centre. Once the day-trippers have left, Bang Bao is quite an interesting **place to stay**, with several options on the main jetty, including the no-frills jetty huts with shared bathrooms at *Paradise* (❷); *Boo Guest House* (Ⓣ089 831 1874; ❸), where all the jetty rooms are en suite; and the very attractive *Bang Bao Sea Hut* (Ⓣ081 285 0570, Ⓦwww.bangbaoseahut.com; ❼), whose fourteen tasteful, octagonal stilted huts overlook the harbour and are connected to the main jetty by a series of walkways.

△ Bang Bao village, Ko Chang

The nearest properly swimmable beach is the narrow sandy stretch at **Hat Bang Bao**, 2km east of the village; you can camp here and there's a small restaurant too. **Songthaews** from Hat Sai Khao take around 45 minutes to Bang Bao and cost about B70.

The east coast

The mangrove-fringed **east coast** is less inviting than the west, and there are hardly any places to stay here. South of the piers at Ao Saparot and Tha Dan Kao, the road runs through long swathes of rubber and palm plantations, with jungle-clad hills to the west and bronze-coloured beaches to the east, passing the national park office and bungalows at **Than Mayom** before reaching the little fishing port of **Salak Pet** on the south coast. Salak Pet is still a fairly quiet spot that's best known for its excellent seafood restaurants; **songthaews** from Trat come all the way here, departing from behind *KFC* in the temple yard in central Trat when full, driving on to the car ferry and then continuing all the way down to Salak Pet (B70). Just 12 kilometres separates Salak Pet from Bang Bao in the southwest, and although the road link between them is almost complete – bar about three kilometres – it is very narrow, gravel-surfaced, and full of dangerous hairpins and steep slopes.

If you fork off the Salak Pet road near the tiny fishing settlement of **Salak Kok**, you can drive down to the tip of the southeastern headland, to **Hat Sai Yao** (also known as **Long Beach**), the prettiest white-sand beach on this coast, which is good for swimming and has some coral close to shore. The famous *Treehouse* bungalows from Lonely Beach have set up a sister operation here, *Treehouse Lodge* (②–③; closed in low season), with a view to relocating entirely when the Lonely Beach bungalows are eventually closed down (see p.247); accommodation is in simple, characterful, thatched bamboo huts. To get here, either get a lift from the Lonely Beach branch, use the Trat-Salak Pet **songthaew** service and wait for the *Treehouse* shuttle in Salak Pet, or take the 3pm Ko Whai **boat** from Laem Ngop (see p.237) and ask to be dropped at the Tantawan pier (1hr), where a *Treehouse* shuttle will pick you up.

The Ko Chang archipelago

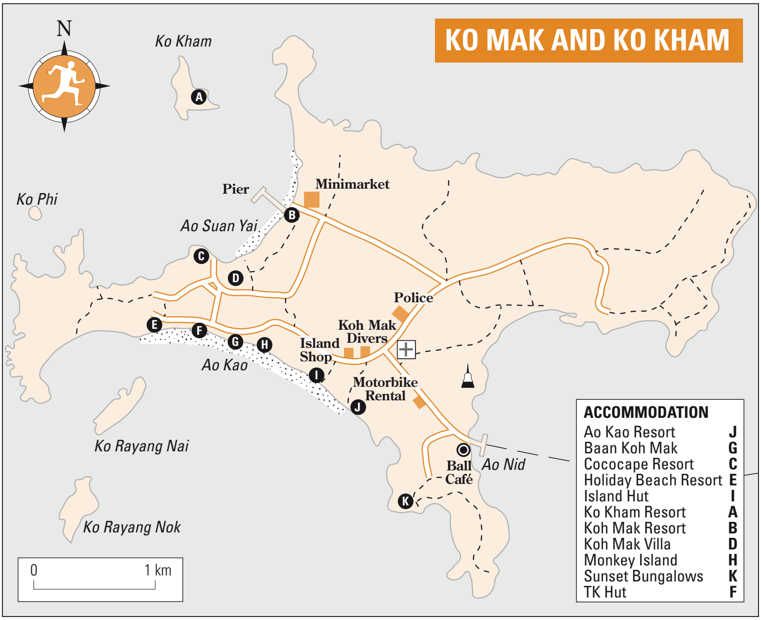
South of Ko Chang lies an **archipelago** of 51 islands, a number of which support at least one set of tourist accommodation. None of the islands are especially appealing during the rainy season, when accommodation and transport options are much reduced, but from November to May the main islands of **Ko Whai**, **Ko Mak** and **Ko Kood** are served by regular boats from Laem Ngop and Ko Chang and by several inter-island speedboats too. There are also plans to build an air strip on one of the uninhabited islands between Ko Mak and Ko Kood. For the latest information on boat times, weather conditions and the proposed air strip, ask at any guest house in Trat or Ko Chang, or at the TAT office in Laem Ngop.

Ko Whai

Lovely, peaceful little **KO WHAI** (or Ko Wai), which lies about 10km off Ko Chang's southeastern headland, is the perfect place to escape the commercialism of Ko Chang. It's only about 3km long and 1.5km wide and has no facilities at all except for some rewardingly shallow reefs and a couple of **places to stay** (Oct–May only): the inviting, very laid-back *Ko Whai Paradise* (☎081 762 2548; ②–④), which has forty basic bamboo huts (no fans, electricity in the evenings only) in varying sizes right on the shore on the western end of the island; and the more comfortable though less atmospheric *Ko Whai Pakarang Resort* (☎081 945 4383; ③–④), which has forty en-suite bungalows with fans across on the next beach, towards the eastern headland. Ploy Scuba (☎039 558033, Ⓦwww.ployscuba.com) can arrange dive trips from the island. **Boats** to Ko Whai depart Laem Ngop's Naval Monument pier (Tha Kromaluang Chumporn; see p.238), once a day at 3pm (approx Nov–May; 2hr 30min; B180). Coming **from Ko Chang**, **Ko Mak or Ko Kood**, you can travel with Bang Bao Boat (☎087 054 4300), which runs daily boats from Ko Chang to Ko Whai (1hr; B200) and on to Ko Mak (1hr 15min), and back again; with the daily speedboat service (☎081 377 4074) from Ko Chang that stops at Ko Whai (15min; B350) and then continues to Ko Mak (30min) and Ko Kood's Khlong Chao (1hr 15min) and Ao Prao (1hr 35min); or with the daily Thai Fun snorkelling boat (see p.239), which runs day-trips from Ko Chang to the islands, making passenger drops and pick-ups at Ko Whai (B350 one-way), Ko Kham and Ko Mak.

Ko Mak and Ko Kham

Many travellers are so seduced by the peaceful pace of life on **KO MAK** (sometimes spelt "Maak"), 20km southeast of Ko Chang, that they wind up staying much longer than they intended. Home to no more than a few hundred people, most of whom either fish or live off the coconut and rubber plantations that dominate the island, Ko Mak measures just sixteen square kilometres and is traversed by a couple of narrow concrete roads and a network of red-earth tracks that cut through the trees. The island is shaped like a cross, with fine white-sand beaches along the southwest coast at **Ao Kao** and the northwest coast at **Ao Suan Yai**; the main pier is on the southeast coast, at the principal village of **Ao Nid**. The tiny


KO MAK AND KO KHAM
N
Ko Kham
A
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Pier
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C
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Koh Mak Divers
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ACCOMMODATION
Ao Kao Resort J
Baan Koh Mak G
Cococape Resort C
Holiday Beach Resort E
Island Hut I
Ko Kham Resort A
Koh Mak Resort B
Koh Mak Villa D
Monkey Island H
Sunset Bungalows K
TK Hut F

Ko Chang, Laem Ngop & Laem Sok ▶

island of **Ko Kham** lies just off Ao Suan Yai and supports only one small resort. Ko Mak gets lashed by wind and rain from early June to September so some bungalows close for the duration (call ahead to check) and there are no speedboat services or boats from Ko Chang during this period, though the daily slow boat from Laem Ngop still runs in all but the worst weather.

Lazing around is the main occupation of most island visitors but the three main centres of Ao Nid, Ao Kao and Ao Suan Yai are all within walking distance of each other, and other parts of the island are also fairly easy to explore on foot, mountain bike or kayak. There's decent **diving and snorkelling** at reefs within an hour's boat ride of Ko Mak, particular at Ko Yak, Hin Yak and No Name reef, which have up to thirty different species of hard and soft coral, and at the 28-metre-deep Hin Gor, where you've a good chance of encountering rays, black-tip sharks, white-tip sharks and leopard sharks. Island dive shops, which operate from October to May only, include Koh Mak Divers (ⓣ085 922 5262), on the road behind *Island Hut*, and Ploy Scuba (ⓣ081 862 7570, ⓦwww.ployscuba.com), bookable through most accommodation. Both run dive trips and courses: prices average B2000 for two fun dives, B10,000 for the four-day Openwater course, and B500 for an accompanying snorkeller. During high season, *Baan Ko Maak* on Ao Kao runs a daily boat across to Ko Rayang Nok (B100/person; minimum six people), which lies less than a couple of kilometres off the western shore and has decent snorkelling; they also do all-day three-island trips to Ko Rang (see p.239), Ko Yak and Ko Kra (B550). *Koh Mak Resort* on Ao Suan Yai runs snorkel boats across to Ko Kham (B60 return, plus B60 visitors' tax).

Island practicalities

The best one-stop shop for **information** on Ko Mak and transport to Trat and the other islands is *Ball Café* at Ao Nid pier (daily 7am–7pm, year-round, ⓣ086 972 4918, ⓔkohmak@gmail.com), where you can also access the Internet, rent high-quality mountain bikes and quaff espressos, cappuccinos and lattes; it's a 20-minute walk from *Island Hut* on Ao Kao or about 30 minutes from *Koh Mak Resort*. There is as yet no major commercial development on the island and no bank, just a couple of local shops at Ao Nid, a tiny minimarket at *Ko Mak Resort* on Ao Suan Yai, and The Island Shop, on the road behind Ao Kao's *Island Hut*, which sells everything from sundresses to silver bangles and Rizla papers. Bungalows on both beaches will **change money** and *Koh Mak Resort* does Visa card cash advances. As well as at *Ball Café*, there's **Internet access** (B2/minute) on Ao Kao at *Ao Kao Resort*, *TK Hut* and *Holiday Beach*, and on Ao Suan Yai at *Koh Mak Resort*; in addition, almost the whole island is wi-fi enabled, care of Ao Suan Yai's *Koh Mak Villa* (B300/day). Ko Mak **post office** is at *Koh Mak Resort*, and there's a small **clinic** on the cross-island road, though for anything serious a speedboat will whisk you back to the mainland). Bring some yellow oil with you from Trat (see p.231) to alleviate the inevitable sandfly bites, or prevent them altogether by embalming yourself in locally produced coconut oil, sold at most bungalows.

There's no public **transport** on the island and virtually no traffic of any sort, so most travellers either walk or rent a bicycle: *Ball Café* at Ao Nid Pier has ten excellent-quality mountain bikes (B150/24 hr) and bikes are also available at some bungalows. Many bungalows also rent motorbikes (B350/day), as does a small restaurant just along the road from Ao Nid pier; apparently it's possible to walk, wade and swim around the entire perimeter of the island in ten hours.

There are a number of **boat services** to Ko Mak, from both the mainland and from Ko Chang and Ko Kood, but as many are seasonal and subject to visitor numbers as well as sea conditions you should phone ahead or ask locally to confirm schedules. Most boats arrive at Ao Nid on Ko Mak's southeastern coast, but wherever boats dock, bungalow staff are always there to meet potential guests. The most reliable service is the **slow boat from Laem Ngop**, which runs daily, year-round, in all but the worst weather, from the Naval Monument pier, Tha Kromaluang Chumporn (see p.238), to Ao Nid (departs 3pm; 3hr 30min; B250); the return boat leaves Ao Nid daily at 8am. From October–May there should also be daily services with **Ko Mak Speedboat** (2 daily to and from Laem Ngop's Naval Monument pier; 1hr; B450; Ⓣ081 921 6591) and **Siriwhite Speedboat** (daily to and from Laem Sok, described on p.255; 40min; B400; Ⓣ086 126 7860). Other operators that run two or three larger and less nerve-racking boats a week during high season between the mainland and Ko Mak include **Ko Mak Express** (departs Laem Ngop's Naval Monument pier; 1hr 30min; B400; Ⓣ039 597296) and **Ko Kud Seatrans** (departs Laem Ngop's Harbour Pier; 1hr 30min; B400; Ⓣ081 444 9259).

Between November and May there's usually a daily Bang Bao boat (Ⓣ087 054 4300) **from Ko Chang** (about 2hr 15min; B300) to Ko Mak, via **Ko Whai** (1hr 15; B200), or you can make use of the Thai Fun snorkelling boat, described on p.239. For travel to or from **Ko Kood**, Nov–May only, there's the daily Siriwhite Speedboat (30min; B250; Ⓣ086 126 7860); the daily speedboat service to Ko Kood's Ao Phrao (1hr; B350; Ⓣ081 377 4074); and the 2–3 weekly Ko Kud Seatrans (1hr; B250; Ⓣ081 444 9259).

Ao Kao

Ko Mak's longest and nicest beach is **AO KAO** on the southwest coast, a pretty arc of sand that's overhung with lots of stooping palm trees and backed in places by mangroves. The beach is divided towards its southern end by a low rocky outcrop that's straddled by *Ao Kao Resort*, with *Sunset Resort* occupying the southern headland beyond, while the long western beach is shared by half a dozen other sets of bungalows. All the bungalows have **restaurants**: *Monkey Shock* restaurant at *Monkey Island* does very good seafood; *TK Hut* does thrice-weekly seafood barbecues; the small beachfront restaurant between *TK* and *Holiday Beach* is famous across the island for its great *som tam*; and *Ao Kao Resort* serves fresh coffees and cappuccinos.

Accommodation

Ao Kao Resort Ⓣ039 501001, ⓦwww.kohmak.com. This long-running and efficient – if impersonal – outfit drops down to the prettiest part of the beach and has a big range of accommodation including simple rattan huts with private bathrooms, and various large, comfortable en-suite timber and concrete bungalows, some with air-con and many with direct sea views. There's Internet access and kayaks, motorbikes and bicycles for rent. Open all year. Fan ②–④, air-con ⑦

Baan Koh Mak Ⓣ089 895 7592, ⓦwww.baan-koh-mak.com. The most bohemian accommodation on the island, with eighteen contemporary beach-chic-style bungalows, featuring rainbow-striped patio doors, comfortable beds, hammocks on the verandas and a good restaurant. It also does kayak rental and boat trips. Open all year; there's a surcharge over Christmas and New Year. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑥

Holiday Beach Resort Ⓣ02 319 6714, ⓦwww.kohmakholiday.com. Located in a very peaceful spot at the far western end of the beach and the end of the road, within swimming distance of good reefs and on a stretch of quality sand. The fifteen fan-cooled en-suite bungalows are set round a grassy shorefront garden and nearly all enjoy unimpeded sea views. Price depends on the size, with the larger ones well designed to catch island breezes via narrow, screened windows on three sides. Internet access. ④, VIP ⑤

Island Hut Ⓣ087 139 5537. Friendly, family-run little place with just a dozen en-suite rough-hewn timber huts with stripy doors, fans and their own deckchairs; they're thoughtfully designed and nearly all sit right on the narrow but pretty shore. ②

Monkey Island Ⓣ081 447 8448, ⓦwww.monkeyislandkohmak.com. There's a distinct whiff of the Bangkok sophisticate here, with club sounds played in the bar-restaurant and bachelor-chic decor in the bungalows – purple sheets on every bed, and huge glass windows and leather-style couches for the top end, air-con "Gorilla" huts". The cheapest "Baboon" huts share bathrooms, and the mid-range "Chimpanzee" huts have fans and huge private bathrooms, but rooms in all categories are very spacious. Shared bathroom ②, fan and bathroom ⑤, air-con ⑦

Sunset Bungalows Ⓣ081 875 4517, Ⓔsunset-bungalow@yahoo.com. Built on a rocky point fifteen minutes' walk south along the track from *Ao Kao*, this is a laid-back if quite isolated place with some of the cheapest huts on the island. They range from pretty basic with fans, mosquito nets and shared bathrooms, to en-suite timber versions with thick mattresses. You'll need to walk to *Ao Kao* for the beach, but swimming is OK here and there's a pleasant deck extending out over the water. Sometimes stays open in low season, though the restaurant closes. ①–②

TK Hut Ⓣ086 111 4378, Ⓦwww.tk-hut.com. German-run place offering good standard, well-priced wood, stone and concrete bungalows set around a neat garden of casuarinas and little hedges. Rooms in all categories are en suite and have fans, with price depending on size and newness. Also has a good seafront bar and restaurant, Internet acess, plus kayak and motorbike rental. ③–⑤

Ao Suan Yai

Long, curvy **Ao Suan Yai** is not as pretty a beach as Ao Kao, but the sand is fine enough and the outlook is beautiful, with Ko Chang's hilly profile filling the horizon and Ko Kham and other islets in between. The main **accommodation** option here is *Koh Mak Resort* (Ⓣ039 501013, Ⓦwww.kohmakresort.com; fan ⑤, air-con ⑦–⑧), a big resort-style outfit with a good choice of large fan and air-con bungalows in all categories, most of them very well spaced around the shorefront garden and within view of the sea. It has lots of facilities, including an attractive bar-restaurant set on a waterfront deck, Internet access, currency exchange and Visa card cash advance, postal services, a taxi service, motorbike and kayak rental, and diving and windsurfing. Its *Cabana* restaurant does especially good *tom yam kung*.

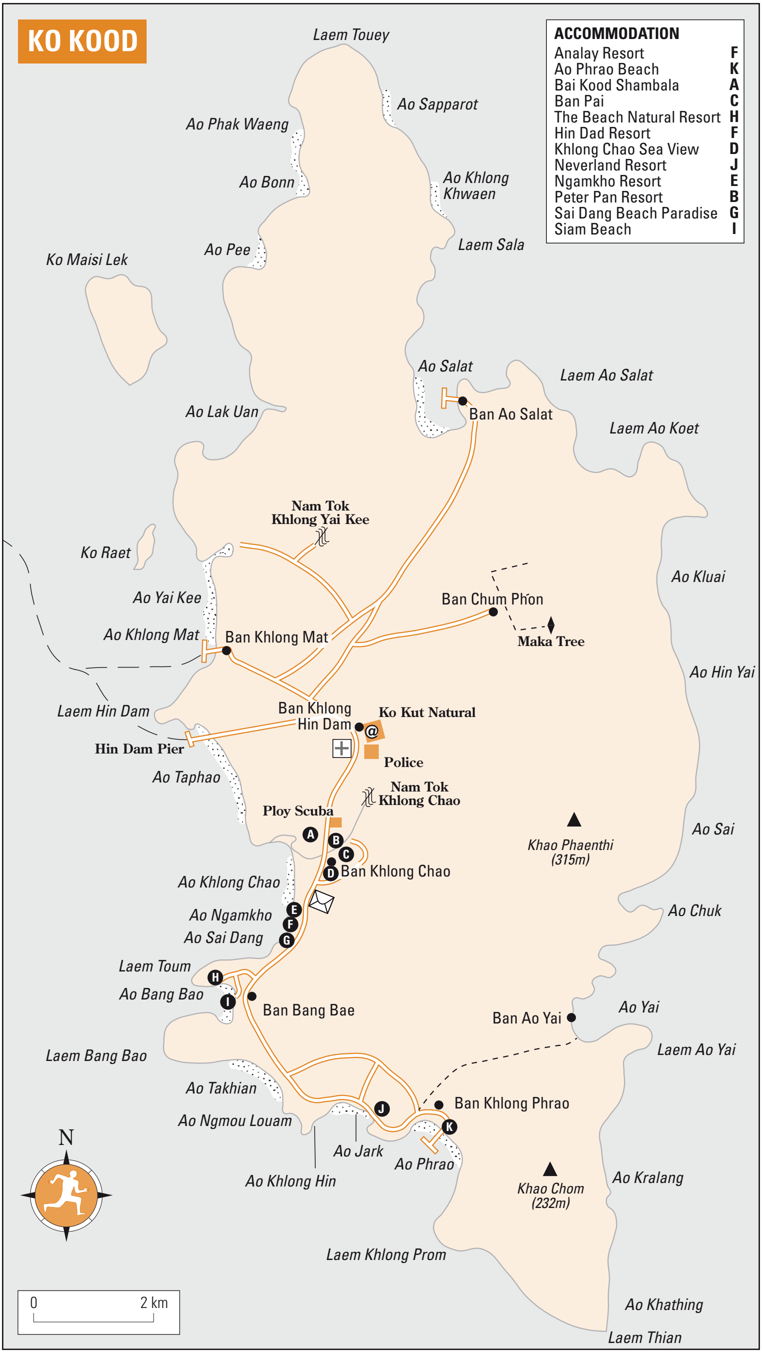
Set high above *Cococape Resort* at the southern end of **Ao Suan Yai**, *Koh Mak Villa* (Ⓣ084 659 7437, Ⓦwww.kohmakvilla.com; ⑦) enjoys outrageously glorious views over Ao Suan Yai and the islands from its hilltop position. It comprises just two very tasteful villas incorporating three fan and air-con rooms apiece, with the two-floored air-con suites bagging the premium views from their enormous glass windows. The villas are about ten minutes' walk uphill from the often non-existent beach at *Cococape,* or 20 minutes away from the better sands at either *Koh Mak Resort*, or *Holiday Beach* and the western end of Ao Kao.

Ko Kham

The miniature, private island of **KO KHAM** (measuring just 300m by 200m) lies almost within swimming distance of Ko Mak's Ao Suan Yai, and has room for just twenty simple bamboo bungalows and a restaurant at *Ko Kham Resort* (Ⓣ081 303 1229, Ⓦwww.kochanghotelsvr.com/kohkhamresort/hotelsthailand.htm; ⑥–⑦). The bungalows are set around the nicely tended garden and on the beach itself, and all have garden bathrooms and fans; the more expensive ones have two storeys. There's little to do here except swim, snorkel, sunbathe and enjoy the peace. From November to May a daily **boat** sails from Laem Ngop's Naval Monument pier (see p.238) to Ko Kham at 3pm (3hr; B250); the return boat leaves Ko Kham at around 8am daily. Or you can get a taxi-boat across from Ao Suan Yai on Ko Mak.

Ko Kood

The second-largest island in the archipelago after Ko Chang (and the fourth-largest in Thailand), forested **KO KOOD** (also spelt Ko Kut and Ko Kud; Ⓦwww.kokood.com) is still a wild and largely uncommercialized island. Though it's known for its sparkling white sand and exceptionally clear turquoise water, par-


KO KOOD
Laem Touey
Ao Sapparot
Ao Phak Waeng
Ao Bonn
Ao Khlong Khwaen
Laem Sala
Ao Pee
Ko Maisi Lek
Ao Salat
Laem Ao Salat
Ban Ao Salat
Laem Ao Koet
Ao Lak Uan
Nam Tok Khlong Yai Kee
Trat, Ko Chang & Ko Mak
Ko Raet
Ao Kluai
Ao Yai Kee
Ban Chum Phon
Ao Khlong Mat
Ban Khlong Mat
Maka Tree
Ao Hin Yai
Laem Hin Dam
Ban Khlong Hin Dam
Ko Kut Natural
@
Hin Dam Pier
Police
Ao Taphao
Nam Tok Khlong Chao
Ploy Scuba
A
B
C
D
Ban Khlong Chao
Khao Phaenthi (315m)
Ao Sai
Ao Khlong Chao
Ao Ngamkho
E
F
Ao Sai Dang
G
Ao Chuk
Laem Toum
H
Ao Bang Bao
I
Ban Bang Bae
Ban Ao Yai
Ao Yai
Laem Ao Yai
Laem Bang Bao
Ao Takhian
Ao Ngmou Louam
J
Ban Khlong Phrao
K
Ao Jark
Ao Phrao
Ao Khlong Hin
Khao Chom (232m)
Ao Kralang
Laem Khlong Prom
Ao Khathing
Laem Thian
N
0
2 km

ACCOMMODATION

Analay Resort	F
Ao Phrao Beach	K
Bai Kood Shambala	A
Ban Pai	C
The Beach Natural Resort	H
Hin Dad Resort	F
Khlong Chao Sea View	D
Neverland Resort	J
Ngamkho Resort	E
Peter Pan Resort	B
Sai Dang Beach Paradise	G
Siam Beach	I

ticularly along the west coast, Ko Kood is as much a nature-lover's destination as a beach bum's. Swathes of its shoreline are fringed by grass and mangrove rather than broad sandy beaches and those parts of the island not still covered in virgin tropical rainforest are filled with palm groves and rubber plantations. Though the island is 25km long and 12km wide, it supports barely more than 20 kilometres of concrete road, with many areas penetrated only by the odd sandy track and, in places, by navigable canals, if at all. The highest point on the island, at just 315 metres, is Khao Phaenthi, towards the southeast. All of which makes Ko Kood a surprisingly pleasant place to explore on foot (or kayak), especially as the cool season brings refreshing breezes most days. The interior is also graced with several waterfalls, the most famous of which is Nam Tok Khlong Chao, inland from Ao Khlong Chao and the focus of day-trips from Ko Chang and Ko Mak.

Most of the 1500 islanders make their living from fishing and growing coconut palms and rubber trees. Many have Khmer blood in them as the island population mushroomed at the turn of the twentieth century when Thais and Cambodians resident in nearby Cambodian territory fled French control. The main settlements are **Ban Khlong Hin Dam**, just inland from the main Hin Dam pier and the attractive west-coast beach at **Ao Taphao**; **Ban Khlong Mat**, a very well-protected natural harbour-inlet a few kilometres further north up the coast; the stilted fishing village of **Ban Ao Salat** across on the northeast coast; and the large fishing community of **Ban Ao Yai**, protected by a safe natural harbour on the southeast coast. On the southwest coast, the main beaches of **Ao Khlong Chao**, **Ao Bang Bao** and **Ao Phrao** also have small villages.

Because of its lack of development, and roads, Ko Kood has to date been the almost exclusive province of package tourists booked in groups of at least ten, speeded onto the island by their resort boats, and kept busy with waterfall outings and snorkelling trips. Things are changing now, however, and the island is beginning to welcome independent travellers with new scheduled boat services from the mainland, as well as from Ko Chang and Ko Mak (and even plans for a possible run to Ban Hat Lek, on the Cambodian border, from Ban Ao Salat on the northeast coast), and the emergence of several small, cheap guest houses. The island is still very much a one-season destination however, as nearly all the boat services only operate from November to May and much of the accommodation is closed outside that period.

Island practicalities

In all but the worst weather, there's a year-round **slow-boat service** from Ban Dan Kao, 6km northeast of central Trat (see p.232), to Ko Kood's Hin Dam pier, currently departing Trat every Tues, Wed, Fri and Sat at 10am and returning from Ko Kood every Tues, Thurs, Fri and Sun at 10am (4hr; B220; ☎089 511 3021). From November to May, **Siriwhite speedboat** (☎086 126 7860) runs a daily service from Laem Sok, about 30km south of Trat (see p.232), to Ko Kood's Ban Khlong Mat (1hr 10min; B500), via Ko Mak (30 mins from Ko Kood; B250). Other operators running services to Ko Kood include **Ko Kud Seatrans** (departs Laem Ngop's Harbour Pier three times a week from Nov–May; 1hr 30min; B400; ☎081 444 9259), via Ko Mak (30min from Ko Kood; B250); and the **Ao Phrao speedboat** service between Ko Chang and Ko Kood's Ao Phrao (1hr 50min; B900; ☎086 133 0402), via Ko Whai (1hr 30min from Ko Kood; B600) Ko Mak (1hr; B350) and Ko Kood's Khlong Chao (20mins; B200). Arrival points vary according to weather conditions, but scheduled boats are always met by resort staff and share-taxis.

Getting around the island is mainly a question of walking or renting your own transport, though you should be able to charter a songthaew for the day for around B1000. You can rent **kayaks** on almost every beach, on Khlong Chao, and through Ko Kut Natural in Ban Khlong Hin Dam, who also have **mountain bikes** and motorbikes (see below). Several other places also rent **motorbikes** (B400/day), but be warned that the west-coast road is very narrow, concrete in parts, dirt and stone in others. Exploring the island **on foot** is both feasible and fun: south of Ao Khlong Chao there are no major hills and much of the route is shady. From Ao Khlong Chao to Ao Bang Bao takes about forty minutes; from Ao Bang Bao to Ao Jark is about an hour's walk, then another twenty minutes to Ao Phrao.

There's no bank on Ko Kood, and though you may be able to **change money** at the biggest resorts, it's best to bring cash with you. There's a **postal agent** behind *S Beach Resort*, beside the road at Ao Ngamkho. The **police** are in Ban Khlong Hin Dam (ⓣ039 521745), as is the **hospital** (ⓣ039 521852). One of the best sources of **information** about the island is Ko Kut Natural, opposite the hospital in Ban Khlong Hin Dam (Mon–Fri 5–9pm; Sat & Sun 9am–9pm; ⓣ089 594 4017 or 086 149 6028; ⓦwww.kokutnatural.com), which is staffed by the local English teacher and computer expert. It produces a good free **map** of the island (especially useful as road signs are sporadic) and rents imported **sea kayaks** (B600/day), **mountain bikes** (B300/two days) and **motorbikes** (B300/day). You can access the **Internet** at Ko Kut Natural and on Ao Khlong Chao (see below). There is some **malaria** on Ko Kood so be especially assiduous with repellent and nets if you are not taking prophylactics.

The two **dive operators** on Ko Kood are based at Ao Khlong Chao: Ploy Scuba Diving (ⓣ081 983 2010, ⓦwww.ployscuba.com) is next to *Bai Kood Shambala*, and Paradise Divers is at *Khlong Chao Resort*, beside the khlong on the road to the falls (ⓣ087 144 5945). Two dives average B2500, with accompanying snorkellers paying B900. You might want to request a trip to somewhere other than Ko Rang (see p.239), which is always packed with dive boats from Ko Chang and Ko Mak. Openwater courses cost B11,500: Ploy does PADI courses and Paradise does CMAS courses.

Ao Khlong Chao

About five kilometres south of the main Hin Dam pier, **AO KHLONG CHAO** (pronounced "Jao") is a fun place to stay because as well as a small sandy beach (no great beauty but a perfectly pleasant "village" beach, currently still without sunloungers or other commercial intrusions), you've got the pretty two-kilometre-long mangrove-lined Khlong Chao that runs down from the famous Khlong Chao Falls. Close by the road-bridge that spans the khlong, no more than 300m from the palm-fringed beach, is a cluster of little guest houses, some of them built partially on stilts over the river, which offer the cheapest accommodation on the island, as well as a number of package-tour resorts, complete with intrusive, late-night karaoke restaurants which unfortunately mar the atmosphere considerably at weekends.

Nam Tok Khlong Chao

The three-tiered **Nam Tok Khlong Chao** is a pretty if unexceptional waterfall, tumbling down into a large, refreshing pool that's perfect for a dip. The falls are best visited in the morning, as during the afternoons, especially at weekends, the constant arrival of groups in longtails and kayaks means you'll not find a spare slab of rock to sit on. It takes around twenty minutes to kayak upriver from the Khlong Chao bridge to the jetty near the falls, followed by a ten-minute walk – though you can also walk the whole thing in half an hour, or even take a car or motorbike to within 500m: just follow the signs from the bridge over the khlong in Khlong Chao. The track continues beyond the falls through fairly dense jungle for another few kilometres before terminating at a rubber plantation, making for a pleasant and very quiet four-hour walk there and back, though watch out for snakes, especially cobras.

Practicalities

Of the several cheap **guest houses** (only minimal English is spoken at all of them), *Ban Pai* (Ⓣ089 931 5683; ②) is the nicest of those on the khlong. It has just eight rooms, a couple of them en suite and all with fans, giving on to a huge deck seating area built right over the khlong, and the owner serves good food, especially fresh fish dishes. The drawback here is the noisy caterwauling at weekends from the karaoke resorts across and upstream. Away from the khlong – and the karaoke noise – friendly *Khlong Chao Sea View* (Ⓣ087 908 3593; ②) is set in a garden beside the road 200m beyond the bridge, from where you can indeed see the sea, 200m away, through the thinly planted palm grove. Its half-dozen bamboo bungalows each have a bathroom and a little veranda and there's good food here too, especially the Penang curries; the owners have a tiny store selling fruit, veg and whisky, which means that locals often congregate here for a drink or six. The most upmarket place to stay in Khlong Chao is *Bai Kood Shambala* (Ⓣ087 147 7055, Ⓦwww.kohkood.com; fan ⑥, air-con ⑧), whose gardens drop down to a rocky chunk of the shore; though there's no beach here you can swim off the jetty, laze in the garden, or take a free kayak across to Ao Khlong Chao beach proper, just a couple of minutes' paddle away. The split-bamboo fan bungalows here are way overpriced, though the air-con versions are quite appealing, if still pricey. There's Internet access here too (B50/30min minimum) and the restaurant serves fresh coffee. Most of the other places to stay in Khlong Chao deal only in pre-booked **package tour deals**. *Peter Pan Resort* (Ⓣ02 966 1800, Ⓦwww.captainhookresort.com), across the khlong from *Ban Pai*, is typical and charges B4000 for three days and two nights full-board, including boat transfers, trips to reefs and waterfalls, and use of kayaks and bicycles; accommodation is in fairly simple wooden chalets.

Every guest house lends or rents **kayaks**, and you can rent **motorbikes** (B400/day) at *Doy's Guest House,* beside the bridge, on the north side. Even without transport, it's quite easy to **walk** from Ao Khlong Chao to any of the beaches further south: it's forty minutes on foot to Ao Bang Bao or around two hours to Ao Phrao, with no real hills, barely any traffic and plenty of shade along the way.

There are two dive shops at Khlong Chao (see p.256). *Mark House*, near *Sea View* on the south side of the bridge, sells ice-creams and a few other general supplies, gives info about boat times, and has **Internet** access.

Ao Ngamkho and Ao Sai Dang

South of Ao Khlong Chao the coastline offers up a handful of mostly tiny bays in between rocky points, accessed via the west-coast road and tracks that meander off it. Having climbed over the point at the south end of Ao Khlong Chao, the road dips down again to the beach at **AO NGAMKHO**. The nicest places to stay here are in two miniature bays between rocky points – with quite rewarding snorkelling and plenty of fish – at its southern end. Traveller-friendly *Ngamkho Resort* (Ⓣ081 825 7076, Ⓔngamkho@yahoo.com; ④) has small but decent en-suite bamboo bungalows, with decks and hammocks, plus a restaurant in the secluded little shorefront garden; it's open year-round. The point itself is shared by the sturdy fan and air-con chalets of *Hin Dad Resort* (Ⓣ081 863 8776; ⑥–⑦) and by *Analay Resort* (Ⓣ081 403 6174; fan ⑥, air-con ⑦), whose quaint Hansel-and-Gretel-style posh timber chalets (fan or air-con) are painted in pastel colours and nearly all enjoy panoramic sea views.

The next-door bay is **AO SAI DANG**, named for its reddish sand and so secluded down a 400-metre-long track that it feels like a little private garden. Grassy and liberally planted with coconut palms, it's dotted with the half- dozen very basic en-suite bamboo huts and five-bed house of *Sai Dang Beach Paradise* (Ⓣ086 329 2580; bungalows ③, house ⑨).

Ao Bang Bao

From Ao Sai Dang, follow signs for *The Beach* to reach **AO BANG BAO**, about twenty minutes' walk further south (fifteen minutes west off the main road). This is one of Ko Kood's prettiest beaches, fronted by a longish sweep of bleach-white sand and deliciously clear turquoise water, plus the inevitable fringe of coconut palms. Though *The Beach Natural Resort* (Ⓣ02 214 2149, Ⓦwww.thebeachkohkood.com; fan and sea view ⑤, air-con ⑥) doesn't actually sit on the nicest part of the beach, but behind a rocky area at the northern end, its upmarket thatched bamboo bungalows are among the most tasteful on the island, built with Balinese accents and featuring elegant furnishings, garden bathrooms and a lovely tropical flower garden. There's massage, kayaks, karaoke and a restaurant here and though it's package-oriented, it's happy to accept independent travellers. *Siam Beach* (Ⓣ081 829 7751; fan ②–③, air-con ⑥; closed low season) occupies almost all of the best part of the beach and is the place to aim for if you're after a low-budget beach-centred stay on Ko Kood. Run by the people behind the various sets of *Siam* bungalows on Ko Chang's Lonely Beach and Hat Kai Bae, it offers huge, rustic, no-frills timber huts on the seafront with either fan or air-con, and slightly smaller cheaper ones further back. The restaurant cooks up regular seafood barbecues and serves travellers' food.

South to Ao Phrao and Ao Yai

Back on the main southbound road at the Ao Bang Bao turn-off, a 35-minute walk through coconut and rubber plantations brings you to **AO KHLONG HIN**, a wild little bay that's dominated mainly by a small coconut-processing centre and is not really great for swimming. Ten minutes further along the road, which hugs the coast so close here it gets washed by the waves at high tide, **AO JARK**, sited at the mouth of a khlong, is another remote and pretty little bay, location of the package-oriented *Neverland Resort* and a good focus for a walk if nothing else (bring your own food and water as there's none here).

Continue twenty minutes further along the pretty coastal road to its current terminus and you reach the most southerly bay **AO PHRAO** (about 3km from Ao Khlong Hin), a long, stunning beach of white sand backed by densely planted palms and the slopes of Khao Chom. You can stay here at *Ao Phrao Beach* (Ⓣ039 525211, Ⓦwww.kokut.com; fan ④, air-con ⑥; 2-day 1-night packages from B2500–3300), a mainly but not exclusively package-oriented cluster of thatched fan and air-con bungalows. Behind Ao Phrao, the tiny fishing village of **BAN KHLONG PHRAO** occupies the mangrove-lined banks of Khlong Phrao (which extends another kilometre inland). You can get simple hot dishes in the village here and signs are that you may soon be able to spend the night as well, as fishing families are starting to sell their homes. A five-kilometre track that's very steep and rough in places connects Ban Khlong Phrao with **AO YAI**, the southeast coast's main fishing village, full of traditional wooden houses and encased safely within a natural harbour.

Inland and the east coast

The administrative centre of the island is **BAN KHLONG HIN DAM**, site of a few homes, the hospital, police station, school and main island temple but little else, other than the information centre and rental outlet at Ko Kut Natural (see p.256). It's about 2km east of the main pier at Laem Hin Dam, 3.5km north of Ao Khlong Chao, 9km north of Ao Khlong Hin and 9km south of Ban Ao Salat.

About five kilometres northwest of Ban Khlong Hin Dam, the small but appealing three-tiered waterfall **Nam Tok Khlong Yai Kee** is basically a smaller version of the famous Nam Tok Khlong Chao and rushes down into a good-sized pool that's ideal for swimming. It's accessible via a five-minute path that's very steep in places but there are ropes at the crucial points.

East off the road to the north coast, in the mature rainforest near Ban Chum Phon, is a locally famous **five-hundred-year-old maka tree** (*bridelia insulana*), known to islanders as the *dtohn maai yai*, that's an impressive 35 metres or more in height and drips with lianas and epiphytes. A one-kilometre path that runs though rubber trees and rainforest will get you there but you'll need to go with a local to stay on the right track. If nothing else it's a good excuse to go further into Ko Kood's extensive forest cover.

The road currently serves just one spot on the west coast and that's the tiny stilt-village and fishing community of **Ban Ao Salat**, 9km northeast of Ban Khlong Hin Dam. Several of the wooden stilt houses strung out along the jetty-promenade serve food so this is a great place for a fresh-seafood lunch, especially crab.

Travel details

Trains

Aranyaprathet to: Bangkok (2 daily; 5hr 15min–5hr 30min).
Pattaya to: Bangkok (1 daily; 3hr 20min); Si Racha (1 daily; 25min).
Si Racha to: Bangkok (1 daily; 3hr); Pattaya (1 daily; 25min).

Buses

Aranyaprathet to: Bangkok (10 daily; 4hr 30min).
Ban Phe to: Bangkok (12 daily; 3hr); Chanthaburi (6 daily; 1hr 30min); Rayong (every 30min; 30min); Trat (6 daily; 3hr).
Chanthaburi to: Bangkok (Eastern Bus Terminal; 18 daily; 4–5hr); Bangkok (Northern Bus Terminal; 5 daily; 3–4hr); Rayong (8 daily; 2hr); Sa Kaew (for Aranyaprathet; 8 daily; 3hr); Trat (every 1hr 30min; 1hr 30min).
Pattaya to: Bangkok (Eastern Bus Terminal; every 30min; 2hr 30–3hr 30min); Bangkok (Northern Bus Terminal; every 30min; 2–3hr); Chanthaburi (6 daily; 3hr); Rayong (every 30min; 1hr 30min); Trat (6 daily; 4hr 30min).
Rayong to: Bangkok (Eastern Bus Terminal; every 40min; 2hr 30min–3hr); Bangkok (Northern Bus Terminal; 5 daily; 3hr); Ban Phe (for Ko Samet; every 30min; 30 min); Chanthaburi (every 30min; 2hr).
Si Racha to: Bangkok (Eastern Bus Terminal; every 30min; 2hr); Bangkok (Northern Bus Terminal; every 30min; 2hr); Chanthaburi (6 daily; 3hr 30min); Pattaya (every 20min; 30min); Rayong (for Ban Phe and Ko Samet; every 30min; 2hr); Trat (6 daily; 5hr).
Trat to: Bangkok (Eastern Bus Terminal; at least hourly; 5–6hr); Bangkok (Northern Bus Terminal; 5 daily; 4–5hr); Chanthaburi (hourly; 1hr 30min); Hat Lek (for the Cambodian border; every 45min; 1hr–1hr 30min); Pattaya (6 daily; 4hr 30min); Rayong (for Ko Samet; 6 daily; 3hr 30min); Si Racha (6 daily; 5hr).

Boats

Ban Phe to: Ko Samet (4–18 daily; 30min).
Ko Chang to: Ko Kood (Nov–May daily; 1hr 50min); Ko Mak (Nov–May 2 daily; 45min–2hr 15min), Ko Whai (Nov–May 2 daily; 15min–1hr 15min), Trat province (hourly; 25min–1hr).
Ko Mak to: Ko Chang (Nov–May 2 daily; 45min–2hr 15min); Ko Kood (Nov–May 2–3 daily; 30min–1hr); Trat province (1–5 daily; 40min–3hr 30min).
Ko Kood to: Ko Chang (Nov–May daily; 1hr 50min); Ko Mak (Nov–May 2–3 daily; 30min–1hr); Trat province (4 weekly–3 daily; 1hr 10min–4hr).
Si Racha to: Ko Si Chang (hourly; 40min).
Trat province to: Ko Chang (hourly; 25min–1hr); Ko Kham (Nov–May 1 daily; 3hr); Ko Kood (4 weekly–3 daily; 1hr 10min–4hr); Ko Mak (1–5 daily; 40min–3hr 30min); Ko Whai (Nov–April 1 daily; 2hr 30min).

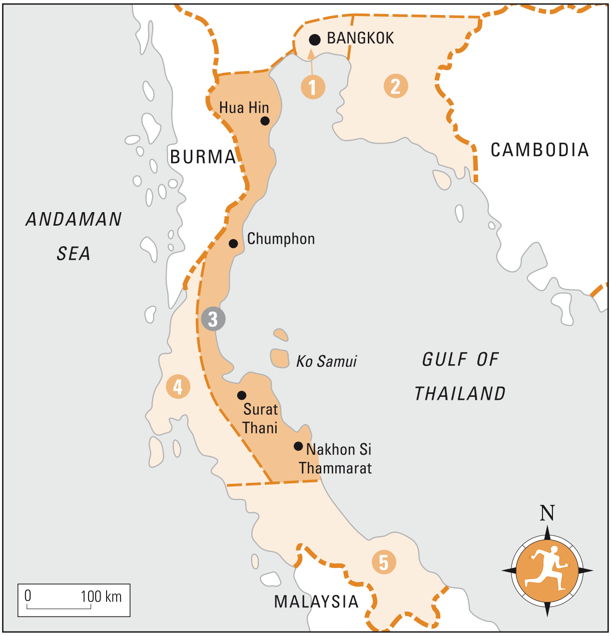
Flights

Pattaya (U-Tapao) to: Ko Samui (2 daily; 1hr); Phuket (1 daily; 1hr 40min).

Trat to: Bangkok (3 daily; 50min); Ko Samui (1 daily; 1hr).

3

Southern Thailand: the Gulf coast


BANGKOK
1
2
Hua Hin
BURMA
CAMBODIA
ANDAMAN SEA
Chumphon
3
Ko Samui
GULF OF THAILAND
4
Surat Thani
Nakhon Si Thammarat
5
MALAYSIA
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0 100 km

CHAPTER 3 Highlights

- **Phetchaburi** Charming historic town, boasting several fine old working temples. See p.265
- **Leisurely seafood lunches** At the squid-pier restaurants in Hua Hin or under the trees at Ban Krud. See p.278 & p.286
- **Bird-watching in Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park** Especially rewarding Sept–Nov. See p.282
- **Ang Thong National Marine Park** A dramatic boat-trip from Samui or Pha Ngan. See p.300
- **Ao Thong Nai Pan on Ko Pha Ngan** Beautiful, secluded bay with good accommodation. See p.326
- **Full moon at Hat Rin** DIY beach parties draw ravers in their thousands. See p.321
- **A boat-trip round Ko Tao** Satisfying exploration and great snorkelling. See p.335
- **Nakhon Si Thammarat** Historic holy sites, shadow puppets and excellent cuisine. See p.340
- **Krung Ching waterfall** Walk past giant ferns and screeching monkeys to reach this spectacular drop. See p.346

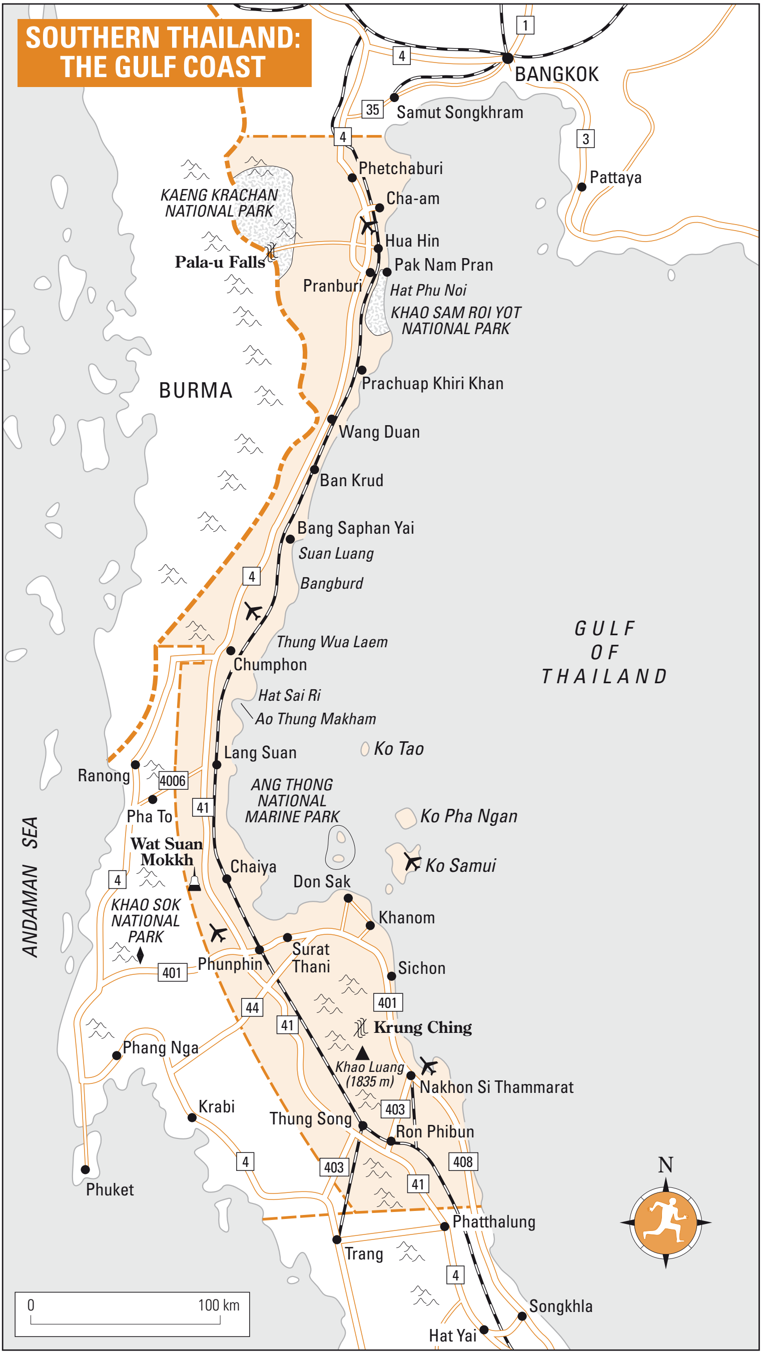
△ Ang Thong National Marine Park

3

Southern Thailand: the Gulf coast

The major part of southern Thailand's **Gulf coast**, gently undulating from Bangkok to Nakhon Si Thammarat, 750km away, is famed above all for the Samui archipelago, three small idyllic islands lying off the most prominent hump of the coastline. This is the country's most popular seaside venue for independent travellers, and a lazy stay in a Samui beachfront bungalow is so seductive a prospect that most people overlook the attractions of the mainland, where the sheltered sandy beaches and warm clear water rival the top sunspots in most countries. Added to that you'll find scenery dominated by forested mountains that rise abruptly behind the coastal strip, especially impressive in **Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park**, which is one of Thailand's most rewarding birdwatching spots, and a sprinkling of historic sights – notably the crumbling temples of ancient **Phetchaburi**. Though not a patch on the islands further south, the stretch of coast around **Cha-am** and **Hua Hin** is popular with weekending Thais escaping the capital and is crammed with condos, high-rise hotels, bars and restaurants, not to mention a large population of foreign tourists. The scene at the sophisticated little beach resort of **Pak Nam Pran**, just a short distance further south, is much quieter, and there's only slightly more development at **Ban Krud**. Though the provincial capital of **Chumphon**, 150km further down the coast, has little to offer in its own right, it's the convenient departure point for direct boats to Ko Tao.

Southeast of Chumphon lies **Ko Samui**, by far the most naturally beautiful of the islands, with its long white-sand beaches and arching fringes of palm trees. The island's beauty has not gone unnoticed by tourist developers of course, and its varied spread of accommodation these days draws as many package tourists and second-homers as backpackers. In recent years the next island out, **Ko Pha Ngan**, has drawn increasing numbers of backpackers away from its neighbour: its bungalows are generally simpler and cost less than Ko Samui's, and it offers a few stunning beaches with a more laid-back atmosphere. The island's southeastern headland, **Hat Rin**, has no less than three white-sand beaches to choose from, but now provides all the amenities the demanding traveller could want and after dusk swings into action as Thailand's dance capital, a reputation cemented by its farang-thronged full moon parties. The furthest inhabited island of the archipelago, **Ko Tao**, has taken off as a **scuba-diving** centre, but despite a growing nightlife and restaurant scene, still has the feel of a small, rugged and isolated outcrop.



SOUTHERN THAILAND: THE GULF COAST

1
4
BANGKOK
35
Samut Songkhram
4
3
Phetchaburi
Pattaya
KAENG KRACHAN NATIONAL PARK
Cha-am
Hua Hin
Pala-u Falls
Pak Nam Pran
Pranburi
Hat Phu Noi
KHAO SAM ROI YOT NATIONAL PARK
BURMA
Prachuap Khiri Khan
Wang Duan
Ban Krud
Bang Saphan Yai
Suan Luang
Bangburd
4
GULF OF THAILAND
Thung Wua Laem
Chumphon
Hat Sai Ri
Ao Thung Makham
Lang Suan
Ko Tao
Ranong
4006
ANG THONG NATIONAL MARINE PARK
41
Pha To
Ko Pha Ngan
Wat Suan Mokkh
ANDAMAN SEA
Chaiya
Ko Samui
4
Don Sak
KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK
Khanom
Surat Thani
Phunphin
401
Sichon
401
44
41
Krung Ching
Phang Nga
Khao Luang (1835 m)
Nakhon Si Thammarat
Krabi
403
Thung Song
Ron Phibun
4
403
408
Phuket
41
Phatthalung
Trang
4
N
Songkhla
Hat Yai
0
100 km

Tucked away beneath the islands, **Nakhon Si Thammarat**, the cultural capital of the south, is well worth a short detour from the main routes through the centre of the peninsula – it's a sophisticated city of grand old temples, delicious cuisine and distinctive handicrafts. With its small but significant Muslim population, and machine-gun dialect, Nakhon begins the transition into Thailand's deep south.

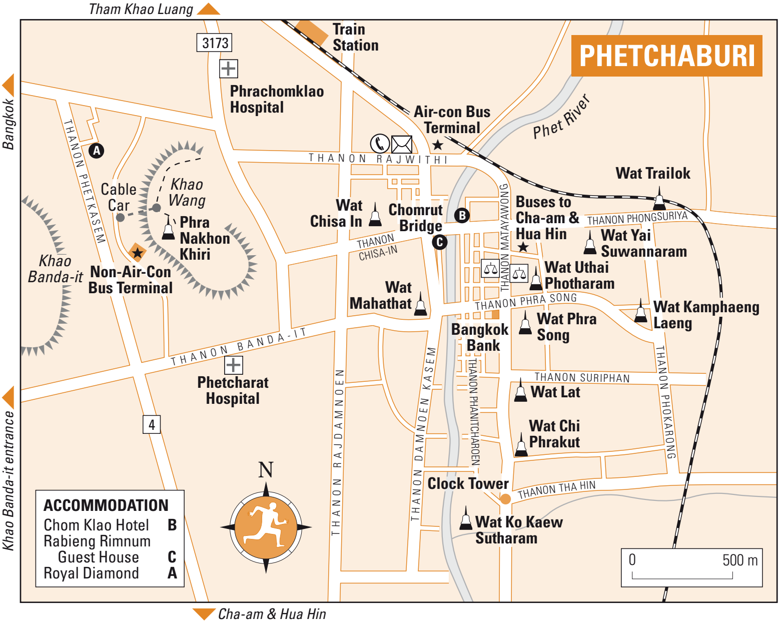
The **train** from Bangkok connects all the mainland towns, including a branch line to Nakhon, and **bus** services, along highways 4 (also known as the Phetkasem Highway, or, usually, Thanon Phetkasem when passing through towns) and 41, are frequent. From Bangkok, Thai Airways, Air Asia and Orient Thai **fly** to Surat Thani, PB Air and Nok Air to Nakhon Si Thammarat, while Bangkok Airways operates a variety of popular routes to Ko Samui's airport. Daily boats run to the islands from two jumping-off points: **Surat Thani**, 650km from Bangkok, has the best choice of routes, but the alternatives from **Chumphon** get you straight to the tranquillity of Ko Tao.

The Gulf coast has a slightly different **climate** to the Andaman coast and much of the rest of Thailand, being hit heavily by the northeast monsoon's rains, especially in November, when it's best to avoid this part of the country altogether. Most times during the rest of the year should see pleasant, if changeable, weather, with some mild effects of the southwest monsoon felt on the islands between May and October. Late December to April is the driest period, and is therefore the region's high season, which also includes July and August. **Jellyfish** can be a problem on the Gulf coast, particularly just after a storm. Fatalities are very rare, but two travellers on Ko Pha Ngan died from (unidentified) jellyfish stings in August 2002. Ask for local advice before swimming, and scour the shore for dead jellyfish, which are a sign that they're in the area; see p.37 for more on jellyfish and how to deal with stings.

Phetchaburi

Straddling the Phet River about 120km south of Bangkok, the provincial capital of **PHETCHABURI** has been settled ever since the eleventh century, when the Khmers ruled the region, but only really got going six hundred years later, when it began to flourish as a trading post between the Andaman Sea ports and Burma and Ayutthaya. Despite periodic incursions from the Burmese, the town gained a reputation as a cultural centre – as the ornamentation of its older temples testifies – and after the new capital was established in Bangkok it became a favourite country retreat of Rama IV, who had a hilltop palace built here in the 1850s, at Khao Wang ("Palace Hill"). Modern Phetchaburi's main claim to fame is as one of Thailand's finest sweet-making centres, the essential ingredient for its assortment of *khanom* being the sugar extracted from the sweet-sapped palms that cover the province. This being very much a cottage industry, twenty-first-century downtown Phetchaburi has lost relatively little of the ambience that so attracted Rama IV: the central riverside area is hemmed in by historic wats in varying states of disrepair, and wooden rather than concrete shophouses still line the river bank.

Despite the attractions of its old quarter, Phetchaburi gets few overnight visitors as most people do it on a day-trip from Bangkok, Hua Hin or Cha-am. It's also possible to combine a day in Phetchaburi with an early-morning expedition from Bangkok to the floating markets of Damnoen Saduak, 40km north; budget tour operators in Bangkok's Thanon Khao San area offer this option as a day-trip package for about B600 per person.


PHETCHABURI
Tham Khao Luang
Bangkok
Khao Banda-it entrance
Cha-am & Hua Hin
3173
4
Train Station
Phrachomklao Hospital
Air-con Bus Terminal
Phet River
THANON RAJWITHI
Wat Trailok
Cable Car
Khao Wang
Phra Nakhon Khiri
Khao Banda-it
Non-Air-Con Bus Terminal
THANON PHETKASEM
Wat Chisa In
Chomrut Bridge
THANON CHISA-IN
Wat Mahathat
THANON MATAYAWONG
Buses to Cha-am & Hua Hin
THANON PHONGSURIYA
Wat Yai Suwannaram
Wat Uthai Photharam
THANON PHRA SONG
Wat Kamphaeng Laeng
Wat Phra Song
Bangkok Bank
THANON BANDA-IT
Phetcharat Hospital
THANON RAJDAMNOEN
THANON DAMNOEN KASEM
THANON PHANITCHAROEN
THANON SURIPHAN
Wat Lat
Wat Chi Phrakut
THANON PHOKARONG
Clock Tower
THANON THA HIN
Wat Ko Kaew Sutharam
N
0
500 m
ACCOMMODATION
Chom Klao Hotel B
Rabieng Rimnum Guest House C
Royal Diamond A

Arrival, information and transport

Arriving by **bus**, you're likely to be dropped in one of three places. The main station for **non-air-con buses** is on the southwest edge of Khao Wang, about thirty minutes' walk or a ten-minute songthaew ride from the town centre. However, non-air-con buses to and from **Cha-am and Hua Hin** use the small terminal in the town centre, less than ten minutes' walk from the Chomrut Bridge accommodation. The **air-con bus terminal** is also about ten minutes' walk from Chomrut Bridge, just off Thanon Rajwithi. Phetchaburi **train station** is on the northern outskirts of town, about 1500m from the main sights.

There's no TAT office in town, but *Rabieng Rimnum Guest House* is a good source of local **information**; there's Internet access at the CAT **phone office** (daily 8.30am–4.30pm), which is next to the **GPO** on Thanon Rajwithi. The branch of Bangkok Bank 150m east of Wat Mahathat on Thanon Phra Song does **currency exchange** and has an ATM. Phetcharat Hospital is on Thanon Banda-It (☎032 417070).

To see the major temples in a day and have sufficient energy left for climbing Khao Wang, you might want to hire a **samlor** for a couple of hours, at about B100 per hour. Alternatively make use of the public **songthaews** that circulate round the town, or **rent** a bicycle or motorbike from *Rabieng Rimnum Guest House*.

Accommodation

Most travellers **stay** at the *Rabieng Rimnum (Rim Nam) Guest House*, centrally located at 1 Thanon Chisa-in, on the southwest corner of Chomrut Bridge (☎032 425707; ②). Occupying a century-old house next to the Phet River and, less appealingly, a noisy main road, the guest house offers nine simple rooms with shared bathrooms, lots of local info and the best restaurant in town; it also rents out bicycles and motorbikes and organizes day-trips and overnight visits to Kaeng Krachan National Park for bird-watching and hiking. Less traveller-oriented, but quieter and cheaper, is the friendly *Chom Klao* hotel across on the northeast corner of Chomrut Bridge at 1–3 Thanon Phongsuriya (Ⓣ032 425398; ①); it's not signed in English, but is easily recognized by its pale-blue doors and riverside location. Some of the rooms give out onto the riverside walkway and you can choose whether or not you want an en-suite bathroom; all rooms have fans. West of Khao Wang, on the outskirts of town, is Phetchaburi's most upmarket option, the *Royal Diamond* (Ⓣ032 411061, Ⓦwww.royaldiamondhotel.com; ⑤), which has comfortable air-con rooms and is located on Soi Sam Chao Phet, just off the Phetkasem Highway.

The Town

The pinnacles and rooftops of the town's thirty-odd **wats** are visible in every direction, but only a few are worth stopping off at to investigate; the following description takes in the top three, and can be done as a leisurely two-hour circular walk beginning from Chomrut Bridge. Phetchaburi's other significant sight, the palace-museum at Phra Nakhon Khiri, is on a hill on the northwestern edge of town, and can be reached both on foot and by public transport.

Wat Yai Suwannaram

Of all Phetchaburi's temples, the most attractive is the still-functioning seventeenth-century **Wat Yai Suwannaram** on Thanon Phongsuriya, about 700m east of Chomrut Bridge. The temple's fine old teak **sala** has elaborately carved doors, bearing a gash said to have been made by the Burmese in 1760 as they plundered their way towards Ayutthaya. Across from the *sala* and hidden behind high whitewashed walls stands the windowless Ayutthaya-style bot. The bot compound overlooks a pond, in the middle of which stands a small but well-preserved scripture library, or **ho trai**: such structures were built on stilts over water to prevent ants and other insects destroying the precious documents. Enter the walled compound from the south and make a clockwise tour of the cloisters filled with Buddha statutes before entering the bot itself via the eastern doorway (if the door is locked, one of the monks will get the key for you). The **bot** is supported by intricately patterned red and gold pillars and contains a remarkable, if rather faded, set of murals, depicting Indra, Brahma and other lower-ranking divinities ranged in five rows of ascending importance. Once you've admired the interior, walk to the back of the bot, passing behind the central cluster of Buddha images, to find another Buddha image seated against the back wall: climb the steps in front of this image to get a close-up of the left foot, which for some reason was cast with six toes.

Wat Kamphaeng Laeng

Fifteen minutes' walk east and then south of Wat Yai, the five tumbledown prangs of **Wat Kamphaeng Laeng** on Thanon Phra Song mark out Phetchaburi as the probable southernmost outpost of the Khmer empire. Built to enshrine Hindu deities and set out in a cruciform arrangement facing east, the laterite corncob-style prangs were later adapted for Buddhist use, as can be seen from the two that now house Buddha images. There has been some attempt to restore a few of the carvings and false balustraded windows, but these days worshippers congregate in the modern whitewashed wat behind these shrines, leaving the atmospheric and appealingly quaint collection of decaying prangs and casuarina topiary to chickens, stray dogs and the occasional tourist.

△ Wat Yai Suwannaram, Phetchaburi

Wat Mahathat and the market

Continuing west along Thanon Phra Song from Wat Kamphaeng Laeng, across the river you can see the prangs of Phetchaburi's most fully restored and important temple, **Wat Mahathat** long before you reach them. Boasting the "Mahathat" title only since 1954 – when the requisite Buddha relics were donated by the king – it was probably founded in the fourteenth century, but suffered badly at the hands of the Burmese. The five landmark prangs at its heart are adorned with stucco figures of mythical creatures, though these are nothing compared with those on the roofs of the main viharn and the bot. Instead of tapering off into the usual serpentine *chofa*, the gables are studded with miniature *thep* and *deva* figures (angels and gods), which add an almost mischievous vitality to the place. In a similar vein, a couple of gold-embossed crocodiles snarl above the entrance to the bot, and a caricature carving of a bespectacled man rubs shoulders with mythical giants in a relief around the base of the gold Buddha, housed in a separate mondop nearby.

Leaving Wat Mahathat, it's a five-minute walk north up Thanon Damnoen Kasem to Thanon Phongsuriya and another few minutes east to Chomrut Bridge, but if you have the time, backtrack a little and return via the **market**, which lines Thanon Matayawong and spills over into the alleyways on either side – there are enough stalls selling the locally famous *khanom* to make it worth your while.

Khao Wang and Khao Banda-It

Dominating the western outskirts, about thirty minutes' walk from Wat Mahathat, stands Rama IV's palace, a stew of mid-nineteenth-century Thai and European styles scattered over the crest of the hill known as **Khao Wang**. During his day, the royal entourage would struggle its way up the steep brick path to the summit, but now there's a **cable car** (daily 8.15am–5.15pm; B50, kids under 90cm tall go free), which starts from the western flank of the hill off Highway 4, quite near the non-air-con bus terminal. To get to the base of the hill from the town centre, take a white local **songthaew** from Thanon Phongsuriya and ask for Khao Wang. If you want to walk to the summit, get off as soon as you see the pathway on the eastern flank of the hill, just across from the junction with Thanon Rajwithi; for the cable car, stay put until you've passed the last of the souvenir stalls on Highway 4, then walk south about 700m. If you do walk up the hill, be warned that hundreds of quite aggressive monkeys hang out at its base and on the path to the top.

Up top, the wooded hill is littered with wats, prangs, chedis, whitewashed gazebos and lots more, in an ill-assorted combination of architectural idioms – the prang-topped viharn, washed all over in burnt sienna, is particularly ungainly. Whenever the king came on an excursion here, he stayed in the airy summer house, **Phra Nakhon Khiri** (daily 9am–4pm; B40, kids B10; Ⓦwww.thailandmuseum.com), with its Mediterranean-style shutters and verandas. Now a museum, it houses a moderately interesting collection of ceramics, furniture and other artefacts given to the royal family by foreign friends. Besides being cool and breezy, Khao Wang also proved to be a good star-gazing spot, so Rama IV had an open-sided, glass-domed observatory built close to his sleeping quarters. The king's amateur astronomy was not an inconsequential recreation: in August 1868 he predicted a solar eclipse almost to the second, thereby quashing the centuries-old Thai fear that the sun was periodically swallowed by an omnipotent lion god. The spot where he observed the eclipse, further down the Gulf coast just south of Prachuap Khiri Khan, is now the site of a commemorative science museum (see p.284), and Rama IV is internationally recognized as the father of Thai science.

If you've got energy to spare, the two cave wats out on the western edges of town make good time-fillers. **Khao Banda-it**, a couple of kilometres west of Khao Wang, comprises a series of stalactite caves filled with Buddha statues and a 200-year-old Ayutthaya-style meditation temple. Five kilometres north of Khao Wang, the dramatic, partially roofless cave **Tham Khao Luang** is filled with assorted Buddha images and chedis, including a huge reclining Buddha statue.

Eating

Phetchaburi's best **restaurant** is the *Rabieng Rimnum* (*Rim Nam*; daily 8am–1am), which is attached to the guest house of the same name and occupies a traditional wooden house beside the Chomrut Bridge, overlooking the Phet River. It offers a long and interesting menu of inexpensive Thai dishes, from banana-blossom salad to spicy crab soup, and is deservedly popular with local diners.

Almost half the shops in the town centre stock Phetchaburi's famous **sweet snacks**, as do many of the souvenir stalls crowding the base of Khao Wang, vendors at the day market on Thanon Matayawong, and the shophouses on the soi behind the Bangkok Bank. The most famous local speciality is *khanom maw kaeng*, a baked sweet egg custard made with mung beans and coconut and sometimes flavoured with lotus seeds, durian or taro. *Khanom taan* is another Phetchaburi classic: small, steamed, saffron-coloured cakes made with local palm sugar, coconut and rice flour, and wrapped in banana-leaf cases.

Cha-am and around

Forever in the shadow of its more famous neighbour, Hua Hin, the beach resort of **CHA-AM**, 41km south of Phetchaburi, picks up the overspill from Hua Hin, 25km further south, and positions itself as a more sedate alternative. It used to be a typically Thai resort, with accommodation catering mainly to families and student groups from Bangkok and an emphasis on shorefront picnics rather than swimming and sunbathing, but that's beginning to change as the Europeans and expats move in, bringing with them package-holiday high-rises and Western-style restaurants. The most developed bit of Cha-am's coastal strip stretches about 3km along Thanon Ruamchit (sometimes spelt Ruamjit), from the *Golden Beach Cha-am Hotel* in the north to the *Santisuk* bungalows in the south. The beach here is pleasantly shaded, though rather gritty and very narrow at high tide, and the water is perfectly swimmable, if not pristine. During the week the pace of life in Cha-am is slow, and it's easy to find a solitary spot under the casuarinas, particularly at the northerly end of the beach, but that's rarely possible at weekends, when prices shoot up and traffic thickens considerably. Away from the seafront there's not much to do here, but there are several **golf courses** within striking distance (see p.277) and buses shuttle between Cha-am and Hua Hin (25km south) every half-hour, taking just 35 minutes.

Practicalities

Nearly all ordinary and air-con **buses** use the bus station (ⓣ032 425307) in the town centre on Thanon Phetkasem (Highway 4), close to the junction with Thanon Narathip, 1km west of the beach. Some private air-con buses to and from Bangkok use the depot at the little plaza on the beachfront Thanon Ruamchit, just south of the Ruamchit/Narathip junction. The **train station** (ⓣ032 861222) is a few short blocks west of this junction. Thanon Narathip is the most useful of the side roads linking Thanon Phetkasem and the beachfront, and ends at a small seaside promenade and **tourist police** booth (ⓣ032 471000) on Thanon Ruamchit, roughly halfway down the three-kilometre strip of beachfront development. To get down to the beach from Thanon Phetkasem, either walk or take a B30 motorbike taxi.

Thanon Ruamchit is where you'll find most of the hotels and restaurants, as well as a few tourist-oriented businesses. **Addresses** on Thanon Ruamchit are determined by whether they are north or south of the Thanon Narathip junction, and the sois running off the beachfront road are labelled accordingly, eg Soi Cha-am North 1 is the first lane off Ruamchit to the north of the Narathip junction, while Soi Cha-am South 1 is the first minor road to the south. The landmark *Golden Beach Cha-am Hotel* at the northern end of the main beachfront sits alongside Soi Cha-am North 8, while *Santisuk* bungalows near the southern end of the beach is next to Soi Cha-am South 4.

The small Thanon Ruamchit **post office** is just north of Soi Cha-am North 5 and has one Internet terminal; there are more terminals inside the CAT **phone office**, which is 200m north up Thanon Narathip from the seafront and several private **Internet** centres along Thanon Ruamchit. A number of shops along the beachfront rent **motorbikes** as well as **tandems** and three-person **pushbikes**. Cha-am's main business district occupies the small grid of streets west of Thanon Phetkasem, between the bus drop and the train station, and this is where you'll find the market, most of the shops, the **police station** (ⓣ032 471323), the **GPO** and banks with **exchange** facilities and ATMs. The local **TAT** office (daily 8.30am–4.30pm; ⓣ032 471005, ⓔtatphet@tat.or.th) is on Highway 4, about 1km south of the centre.

Accommodation

Most of the cheaper accommodation is concentrated on **central Cha-am Beach**, set along the west side of beachfront Thanon Ruamchit. There are no obvious backpacker-oriented guest houses in Cha-am; instead you'll find mainly small, mid-range hotels. The more expensive accommodation occupies the 25km of coastline **between Cha-am and Hua Hin**, where resorts are able to enjoy what are in effect private beaches, though guests without transport have to rely on hotel shuttles or public buses to get to the shops and restaurants of Cha-am or Hua Hin. Many Cha-am hotels give a fifteen- to thirty-percent discount from Sunday to Thursday.

Central Cha-am Beach

Golden Beach Cha-am Hotel Just south of Soi Cha-am North 8 at 208/14 Thanon Ruamchit ⓣ032 433830. Good-value high-rise where the nicely appointed deluxe rooms all have a balcony, most of which afford a partial, long-distance, sea-view. All rooms are equipped with air-con, and TV, and there's a swimming pool. Fifty-percent discounts during the week. ⑥

Kaenchan Beach Hotel North of Soi Cha-am North 7 241/3 Thanon Ruamchit ⓣ032 471314, ⓦkaenchan-beach-hotel.th66.com. Characterful and stylish mid-sized hotel, with a papaya-coloured facade, a sixth-floor swimming pool and appealing, sleekly furnished rooms, all with air-con, TV and sea view. Also has some terraced bungalows in the garden behind. ⑥

Nirandorn 3 Just south of the Narathip junction on Thanon Ruamchit ⓣ032 470300, ⓕ032 470303. Clean, well-maintained hotel rooms with air-con and TV – the best ones are on the upper floors and have sea views. ⑥

Between Cha-am and Hua Hin

Beach Garden Hotel and Spa About 7km south of Cha-am at 949/21 Soi Suan Loi, off Thanon Phetkasem ⓣ032 508234, ⓦwww.beachgardenchaam.com. Set in a lush tropical garden that runs down to the sea, accommodation in this good-value resort is in either attractive, comfortably furnished cottages or a less characterful but smart hotel block with sea views. There's a swimming pool, games room, tennis courts, windsurfing and other watersports facilities. ⑦–⑧

Dusit Resort Hua Hin 14km south of Cha-am and 9km north of Hua Hin at 1349 Thanon Phetkasem ⓣ032 520009, ⓦhuahin.dusit.com. One of the most luxurious spots on this stretch of coast, with 300 large, elegant rooms set around a tropical garden and lotus-filled lagoon. Facilities include four restaurants, a huge pool and children's pool, a spa, horseriding, and tennis and squash courts. It runs frequent shuttles into Hua Hin and has an Avis car rental desk. ⑨

Regent Cha-am About 8km south of Cha-am at 849/21 Thanon Phetkasem ⓣ032 451240, ⓦwww.regent-chaam.com. Well-regarded upmarket chain resort set in appealing gardens that run down to a nice stretch of beach. Choose between rooms in differently appointed wings: old-style or more modern; with or without sea view; hotel wing or chalet style. Facilities include three swimming pools, squash and tennis courts, a fitness centre and horseriding on the beach. ⑦–⑨

Eating and drinking

The choice of **restaurants** in Cha-am is not a patch on the range you get in Hua Hin, but for a change from hotel food you might want to drop by the *Tipdharee* on Thanon Ruamchit, north of Soi Cha-am North 5, which has a huge menu of mid-priced Thai dishes, including lots of seafood, curries and one-plate dishes. *Poom*, about 150m north of Soi Cha-am North 5 at 274/1 Thanon Ruamchit, serves a good, if pricey selection of Thai-style seafood dishes (B80–200), including recommended shrimps with garlic, on its sea-view terrace. *Baan Plang Pub and Restaurant* on Thanon Narathip opens nightly from 7pm to 2am and stages live music.

Phra Ratchaniwet Marukhathaiyawan

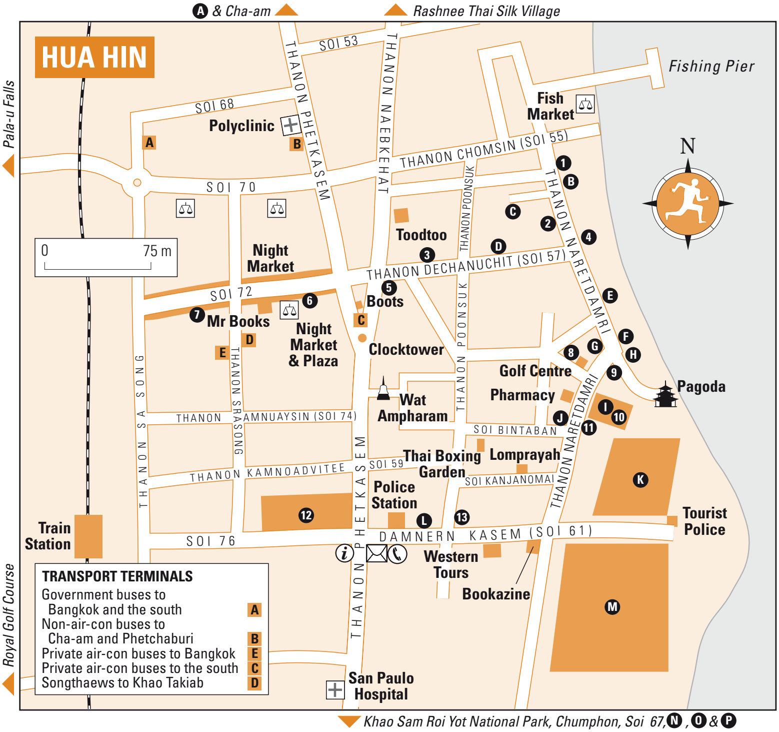
Ten kilometres south of Cha-am, on the way to Hua Hin, stands the lustrous seaside palace of Rama VI, **Phra Ratchaniwet Marukhathaiyawan** (daily 8am–4pm; B90), a rarely visited place, despite the easy access; the half-hourly Cha-am–Hua Hin buses stop within a couple of kilometres' walk of the palace at the sign for Rama VI Camp – just follow the road through the army compound.

Designed by an Italian architect and completed in just sixteen days in 1923, the golden teak building was abandoned to the corrosive sea air after Rama VI's death in 1925. Restoration work began in the 1970s, and today most of the structure looks as it once did, a stylish composition of verandas and latticework painted in pastel shades of beige and blue, with an emphasis on cool simplicity. The spacious open hall in the north wing, hung with chandeliers and encircled by a first-floor balcony, was once used as a theatre, and the upstairs rooms, now furnished only with a few black-and-white portraits from the royal family photo album, were given over to royal attendants. The king stayed in the centre room, with the best sea view and access to the promenade, while the south wing contained the queen's apartments.

Hua Hin

Thailand's oldest beach resort, **HUA HIN** used to be little more than an overgrown fishing village with one exceptionally grand hotel, but the arrival of mass tourism, high-rise hotels and farang-managed hostess bars has made a serious dent in its once idiosyncratic charm. With the far superior beaches of Ko Samui, Krabi and Ko Samet all so easily accessible from Bangkok, there's little here to draw the dedicated sun-seeker, but it's nonetheless a convivial place in which to drink and enjoy fine seafood and, if you can afford it, stay in the atmospheric former *Railway Hotel*. In addition, the town makes a convenient base for day-trips to Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park, 63km south, and there are half a dozen golf courses in the area, plus a couple of exceptionally indulgent hotel spas. If none of that appeals, you might consider stopping by for Hua Hin's well-respected **jazz festival** in June (check Ⓦwww.thailandgrandfestival.com for details), or for the rather more unusual **elephant polo tournament**, held every September (Ⓦwww.thaielepolo.com).

The **royal family** were Hua Hin's main visitors at the start of the twentieth century, but the place became more widely popular in the 1920s, when the opening of the Bangkok–Malaysia rail line made short excursions to the beach much more viable. The Victorian-style *Railway Hotel* was built soon after to cater for the leisured classes, and in 1926 Rama VII had his own summer palace, Klai Klangwon (Far from Worries), erected at the northern end of the beach. It was here, ironically, that Rama VII was staying in 1932 when the coup was launched in Bangkok against the system of absolute monarchy. The current king lives here most of the time now, apparently preferring the sea breezes to the traffic fumes of the capital, which means that the navy is on constant guard duty in the resort and the police are also on their best behaviour; consequently both Thais and expats consider Hua Hin an especially safe place to live and do business – hence the number of farang-oriented real estate agencies in the area. But the town is not without its controversies, most pressing of which is the local government's plan to bulldoze the Thanon Naretdamri **neighbourhood of squid-pier restaurants and guest houses** – Hua Hin's most distinctive attraction – and replace it with a privately financed promenade and shopping plaza. The squid piers are the hub of the original fishing village, which dates back to the early nineteenth-century; as the fishing industry declined, local families looked to tourism as an alternative source of income, converting their jetties into the restaurants and guest houses that are still *in situ* today. But despite successive generations having lived on the same spot for 170 years, they have no land-ownership papers, and so the authorities consider their piers an encroachment on public land (the sea). At the time of writing, the community was taking legal action to try and save their neighbourhood.


HUA HIN
A & Cha-am
Rashnee Thai Silk Village
Pala-u Falls
Royal Golf Course
Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park, Chumphon, Soi 67, N, O & P
Fishing Pier
Fish Market
N
0 75 m
SOI 53
SOI 68
SOI 70
SOI 72
SOI 76
THANON PHETKASEM
THANON NAEBKEHAT
THANON CHOMSIN (SOI 55)
THANON POONSUK
THANON DECHANUCHIT (SOI 57)
THANON NARETDAMRI
THANON SA SONG
THANON SRASONG
THANON AMNUAYSIN (SOI 74)
THANON KAMNOADVITEE
SOI 59
SOI BINTABAN
SOI KANJANOMAI
THANON DAMNERN KASEM (SOI 61)
Polyclinic
Night Market
Mr Books
Night Market & Plaza
Toodtoo
Boots
Clocktower
Golf Centre
Pharmacy
Wat Ampharam
Pagoda
Thai Boxing Garden
Lomprayah
Police Station
Tourist Police
Train Station
Western Tours
Bookazine
San Paulo Hospital
TRANSPORT TERMINALS
Government buses to Bangkok and the south A
Non-air-con buses to Cha-am and Phetchaburi B
Private air-con buses to Bangkok E
Private air-con buses to the south C
Songthaews to Khao Takiab D

ACCOMMODATION

All Nations	D	City Beach Resort	L	Karoon Hut	B
Anantara Resort & Spa	A	Fresh Inn	J	Mod Guest House	F
Bird	H	Fu-Lay Guest House & Hotel	E	Pattana Guest Home	C
Central Village Hua Hin	K	Hilton Hua Hin	I	Sofitel Central Hua Hin	M
Chiva-Som International Health Resort	N	Jinning Beach Guest House	P	Veranda Lodge	O
		K Place	G		

RESTAURANTS & BARS

Brasserie de Paris	1	Som Moo Joom	5
Chao Lay	4	A Taste of Asia	3
Hua Hin Brewing Company	11	Tarachan Restaurant	6
Jasmine's	8	La Villa	13
Lung Ja	7	White Lotus	10
Monsoon	2	World News Coffee	9
Satukarn Square	12		

Arrival, information and transport

Hua Hin is on the Bangkok–Surat Thani rail line, but journeys tend to be slow (3hr 30min–4hr from Bangkok), and inconveniently timetabled. You can also get from Kanchanaburi to Hua Hin by train, but you need to change trains at Ban Pho (not listed on English-language timetables). Famously photogenic Hua Hin **train station** (☎032 511073), which has changed little since it was built in the 1920s, is at the west end of Thanon Damnern Kasem, about ten minutes' walk from the seafront.

Hua Hin's **bus** service is more useful, though there are a confusing number of bus arrival and departure points (see map for locations). Non-air-con **Cha-am and Phetchaburi** buses arrive and depart from a spot just north of the junction of Thanon Phetkasem and Thanon Chomsin; private air-con buses to and from **Bangkok** (Southern Bus Terminal; every 40min; 3hr) depart from beside the *Sri Phetkasem* hotel on Thanon Sa Song; government buses to and from Bangkok

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HUA HIN

△ Hua Hin's historic train station

(second class only; every 25min; 3hr 30min), **Chumphon** and **the south** use a depot off the west end of Thanon Chomsin; and private buses to southern destinations, including the Lomprayah service, pick up passengers from beside the clocktower on Thanon Phetkasem. There's also a private minivan service to and from Bangkok's Victory Monument (every 30min; 3hr; Ⓣ081 633 0609) which drops passengers in central Hua Hin on Thanon Phetkasem. All government and private services to southern destinations originate in Bangkok and most come through Hua Hin in the evening, arriving at their destination next morning. Generally government buses are cheaper but some private buses offer a VIP service with fewer seats; the government bus station posts timetables and prices of its services on the wall, and most travel agents should have schedules of available private services and will sell tickets. Destinations include Surat Thani (7hr; B700–900), Phuket (9hr; B850–1250), Krabi (9hr; B850–1120) and Hat Yai (10hr; 930–1250); note that prices are flexible because of intense competition among ticket agents in town and also depend on the class of the bus. Lomprayah runs a twice-daily bus and catamaran service, beginning in Bangkok and picking up in Hua Hin (daily at 8.30am and midnight) to **Ko Tao** (B850), **Ko Pha Ngan** (B1250) and **Ko Samui** (B1400) via the Lomprayah catamaran pier at Chumphon (Ⓣ032 553739, Ⓦwww.lomprayah.com; book at their office on Soi Kanjanomai or through most travel agents).

Tiny Hua Hin **airport** (Ⓣ032 522300) is 6km north of town, beside the Phetkasem Highway, and is currently served only by tiny, expensive SGA 12-seat Cessna planes (Ⓦwww.sga.aero/en/huahin.html; 3 daily; 40min; B3100) to and from Bangkok. Alternatively, the limousine service from Suvarnabhumi airport in Bangkok costs B3200, or you should be able to get an official metered taxi from there for around B2500, which is the price Hua Hin's taxi touts offer for return transfers (about 3hr). A direct public bus service between Suvarnabhumi and Hua Hin is also planned, to be operated by the government transport company Baw Khaw Saw.

Information and city transport

The rudimentary **tourist information** desk at the local government office (daily 8.30am–8pm; ⓣ032 532433), on the corner of Thanon Damnern Kasem and Thanon Phetkasem, can supply town maps and limited info.

For getting around, Hua Hin has plenty of **samlors** and **motorbike taxis**, but many tourists rent cars and motorbikes to explore the area by themselves (see "Listings" on p.279 for details).

Accommodation

A night or two at the former *Railway Hotel* (now the *Sofitel*) is reason in itself to visit Hua Hin, but there are plenty of other **places to stay**. The most unusual guest houses are those built on the squid piers (now under threat of destruction), with rooms strung out along wooden jetties so you can hear, feel – and smell – the sea beneath you, even if you can't afford a room with an actual sea view. Rooms at jetty guest houses are no bargain – they tend to be a bit pokey and there's a rather strong aroma of seashore debris at low tide – but they are characterful. Room rates at many places can drop significantly from Mondays to Thursdays, so don't be afraid to ask for a discount.

About 15 minutes' walk south down the beach from the *Sofitel,* or 2km by road down the Phetkasem Highway, there's a little knot of accommodation on **Soi 67**, just south of the *Marriott Hotel*. Here, facing each other across the short, narrow soi about 200m back from the beach, are about a dozen little guest houses, mainly Scandinavian-Thai run; none comprise more than 20 rooms and most charge B900. They're very popular with older European couples, many of whom return for several months every winter, so booking is essential. Resorts beyond the northern fringes of Hua Hin, on the stretch of coast **between Hua Hin and Cha-am**, are described on p.271, and those in Pranburi/Pak Nam Pran, south of Hua Hin, are covered on p.280.

Inexpensive and moderate

All Nations 10 Thanon Dechanuchit ⓣ032 512747, ⓔcybercafehuahin@hotmail.com. A range of comfortable rooms in varying sizes, many of them with balconies, a few with distant sea views, some with air-con, and most with bathrooms shared between two rooms. Also has a roof terrace. Good value for Hua Hin. Fan ③, air-con ④

Bird 31/2 Thanon Naretdamri ⓣ032 511630, ⓔbirdguesthousehuahin@hotmail.com. A classic friendly little jetty guest house, with smallish and fairly basic en-suite rooms set over the water (those with air-con occupy the prime end-of-pier position), plus a nice breezy sea-view terrace at the end. Reserve ahead as it's very popular. Fan ③, air-con ④

Fresh Inn 132 Thanon Naretdamri ⓣ032 511389, ⓕ032 532166. Small Italian-run hotel with a friendly, cosy atmosphere and a swimming pool. Rooms are quite stylishly furnished and all have air-con and TV. ⑦

Fu-Lay Guest House and Hotel 110/1 Thanon Naretdamri, guest house ⓣ032 513145, hotel ⓣ032 513670, ⓦfulay-huahin.com. *Fu-Lay* is in two halves, with guest-house rooms strung along a jetty and hotel accommodation in a low-rise block across the street. The jetty guest-house rooms are the most stylish of their kind in Hua Hin, offering attractively appointed air-con rooms with nice en-suite bathrooms and TV, plus some cheap cell-like en-suite fan rooms too and a breezy seating area set right over the water. Air-con rooms in the small hotel wing across the road are more upmarket, with the pricier ones on the upper floors offering sea views from their shared verandas. Jetty fan ③, jetty air-con ⑤, hotel ⑤–⑦

Jinning Beach Guest House East end of Soi 67, off Thanon Phetkasem ⓣ032 532597, ⓦwww.jinningbeachguesthouse.com. Typical Soi 67 guesthouse under welcoming Danish-Thai management, with just 16 good-sized air-con rooms, some with verandas, and all with TV and fridge. ⑤–⑥

Karoon Hut 80 Thanon Naretdamri Ⓣ032 530242, Ⓕ032 530737. Friendly jetty guest house, with decent fan- and air-con rooms (no cells) and a nice big open-air seating area at the end of the pier. Well priced for Hua Hin. Fan ③, air-con ④–⑤

K Place 116 Thanon Naretdamri Ⓣ032 511396, Ⓔkplaceus@yahoo.com. Just ten large, comfortable and well-appointed rooms behind the minimarket, all with air-con and TV, make this small place a good-value mid-range option. There's a roof terrace too. ⑤–⑥

Mod Guest House 116 Thanon Naretdamri Ⓣ032 512296. Jetty guest house with some good rooms (a few with air-con), others fairly basic but very cheap (for Hua Hin), plus a seafront seating area. Call ahead to secure a room. Fan ②, air-con ③–④

Pattana Guest Home 52 Thanon Naretdamri Ⓣ032 513393, Ⓔhuahinpattana@hotmail.com. Cosy, comfortable rooms with character in an appealingly traditional and attractively furnished teak-wood house, quietly located at the end of a small soi. Some rooms have private bathrooms. ③

Expensive

Anantara Resort and Spa 5km north of Hua Hin at 43/1 Thanon Phetkasem Ⓣ032 520250, Ⓦwww.anantara.com. Set in effusive, beautifully designed tropical gardens that run right down to the shore, this is a lovely resort-style idyll, just out of town. Accommodation is in a series of Thai-style pavilions, whose stylishly appointed rooms use plenty of wood. It has three restaurants, two free-form pools, a charming spa and its own stretch of beach. ⑨

Central Village Hua Hin Thanon Damnern Kasem Ⓣ032 512036, Ⓦwww.centralhotelsresorts.com. Like its sister operation, the adjacent *Sofitel*, the *Central Village*, comprising 41 cream-painted wooden villas set in a seafront garden, has a distinctive old-fashioned charm, though it's less swanky and more homely than its neighbour. All the villas have large verandas, and some have two rooms and an uninterrupted sea view. There's a pool and a restaurant on the premises, and guests can also use the facilities at the *Sofitel* over the road. ⑨

Chiva-Som International Health Resort About 3km south of the *Sofitel* at 73/4 Thanon Phetkasem Ⓣ032 536536, Ⓦwww.chivasom.com. Super-deluxe beachfront spa and health resort that's a favourite with A-list celebs and is famous for its personalized holistic health treatments, detox programmes, fitness plans and psycho-spiritual consultations. Accommodation is in 57 exclusive bungalows and hotel rooms set in tropical beachfront gardens. Published rates for full board with treatments start at US$1140 per person for the minimum three-day stay. ⑨

City Beach Resort 16 Thanon Damnern Kasem Ⓣ032 512870, Ⓦwww.citybeach.co.th. A good upper-mid-range option that's reasonably priced, centrally located and has a swimming pool, a nightclub and a couple of restaurants. Air-con rooms in the high-rise block are comfortable, if old-fashioned, with most enjoying a sea view from the balcony. ⑦

Hilton Hua Hin 33 Thanon Naretdamri Ⓣ032 512888, Ⓦwww.huahin.hilton.com. Set bang in the centre of Hua Hin's beachfront, the *Hilton's* high-rise profile disfigures the local skyline, but the facilities are extensive and the views excellent. There's a large, inviting lagoon-like swimming pool right on the seafront, a spa, a kids' club, a panoramic Chinese restaurant (see p.279) and an impressive indoor-outdoor water garden in the lobby. All 300 rooms are large and comfortable and have sea-view balconies; published rates start at US$189. ⑨

Sofitel Central Hua Hin 1 Thanon Damnern Kasem Ⓣ032 512021, Ⓦwww.sofitel.com. The former *Railway Hotel* remains a classic of colonial-style architecture, with high ceilings, polished wood panelling, period furniture, wide sea-view balconies and a garden full of topiary animals. All is much as it was in 1923, except for the swimming pools and tennis courts, which were built especially for the filming of *The Killing Fields* – the *Railway Hotel* stood in as Phnom Penh's plushest hotel. The hotel also has a spa. Internet rates start at B6840; weekends get booked out several weeks in advance. ⑨

Veranda Lodge Beachfront end of Soi 67, off Thanon Phetkasem Ⓣ032 533678, Ⓦwww.verandalodge.com. Chic 18-room boutique hotel set a little apart from the Soi 67 guesthouses in its own beachfront garden. Deluxe rooms have a contemporary look (lime green, pink or china-blue walls) and petite balconies; suites have separate living rooms and sea-view balconies. All rooms have air-con and cable TV and there's a small pool and seafront terrace restaurant. ⑧–⑨

The resort

The prettiest part of Hua Hin's five-kilometre-long **beach** is the patch in front of and to the south of the *Sofitel*, where the sand is at its softest and whitest. North of here the shore is crowded with tables and chairs belonging to a string of small restaurant shacks, beyond which the beach ends at a Chinese temple atop a flight of steps running down to Thanon Naretdamri. The coast to the north of the pagoda is dominated by the jetties and terraces of the squid-pier guest houses and seafood restaurants.

South of the *Sofitel*, holiday homes and high-rise condos overshadow nearly the whole run of beach down to the promontory known as Khao Takiab (Chopstick Hill), 6km further south, but during the week it's fairly quiet along here, with just a few widely spaced food stalls along the broad, squeakily soft beach. Kiteboarding Asia (Ⓦwww.kiteboardingasia.com) runs **kiteboarding** courses from a spot off the end of Soi 75/1, about 2.5km south of the *Sofitel* (B11,000 for a three-day course; best conditions from March to May). **Khao Takiab** itself is a wooded outcrop surmounted by a temple and home to a troop of monkeys; the road to the top is guarded by a tall, golden, standing Buddha and affords good coastal views. Green songthaews run to Khao Takiab from central Hua Hin, departing from Thanon Sa Song, just south of the junction with Soi 72 (at least every 30min; B10; 15min).

Pala-u Falls and other excursions

Hua Hin is well placed for **excursions** to Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park (described on p.282), Phetchaburi (see p.265) and the old summer palace of Phra Ratchaniwet Marukhathaiyawan (see p.271). The fifteen-tiered **Pala-u Waterfall** is another popular destination within day-tripping distance and, though the falls themselves are hardly exceptional, the route there takes you through lush, hilly landscape and past innumerable pineapple plantations. The falls are 63km west of Hua Hin, close to the Burmese border and within **Kaeng Krachan National Park** (daily 8am–4.30pm; B200; Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp). There's no public transport to the falls, but every tour operator features them in its programme (about B1300/person). To get there under your own steam, follow the signs from the west end of Thanon Chomsin along Highway 3218. Once inside the park you'll see hundreds of butterflies and may also catch sight of monitor lizards and hornbills. A slippery and occasionally steep path follows the river through the fairly dense jungle up to the falls, passing the (numbered) tiers en route to the remote fifteenth level, though most people opt to stop at the third level, which has the first pool of any decent depth (full of fish but not that clear) and is a half-hour walk from the car park.

Golf courses

The Thai enthusiasm for **golf** began in Hua Hin in 1924, with the opening of the Royal Hua Hin Golf Course behind the train station, and now there are another five courses of international standard in the Hua Hin/Cha-am area. Visitors' green fees range from B1300 to B2500 on a weekday, B1600 to B2500 at a weekend, plus about B200 for a caddy. Some clubhouses also rent sets of clubs for B500, or you can ask at the Hua Hin Golf Centre (daily noon–10pm; Ⓣ032 530119, Ⓦwww.huahingolf.com) on Thanon Naretdamri across from the *Hilton*, which also sells and repairs clubs and organizes trips to local courses. Many other general tour operators also offer golf packages, which include transfers and green fees.

The historic eighteen-hole Royal Hua Hin Golf Course (Ⓣ032 512475) is the most centrally located of the **courses**, easily reached on foot by simply crossing the railway tracks to the west side of Hua Hin Railway Station. All the others are outside town and all have eighteen holes except where noted: Bangkok Golf Milford (Ⓣ032 572441; 15km south of Hua Hin near Pak Nam Pran); Imperial Lake View (27 holes; Ⓣ032 456233; 15km north of Hua Hin); Majestic Creek Country Club (Ⓣ032 520162; 20km west of Hua Hin); Palm Hills Golf Resort (Ⓣ032 520800, Ⓦwww.palmhills-golf.com; 8km north of Hua Hin); Springfield Royal Country Club, designed by Jack Nicklaus (Ⓣ032 593223, Ⓦwww.springfieldresort.com; 22km north of Hua Hin, just to the south of Cha-am).

Eating, drinking and entertainment

Hua Hin is renowned for its **seafood**, and some of the best places to enjoy the local catch are the seafront and squid-pier restaurants along Thanon Naretdamri. Fish also features heavily at the large and lively **night market**, which sets up at sunset along Soi 72 (the western end of Thanon Dechanuchit). The biggest concentration of **bars** is in the network of sois between the *Hilton Hotel* and Wat Hua Hin, particularly along Soi Bintaban, Soi Kanjanomai and Thanon Poonsuk; many of these places are so-called "bar-beers", with lots of seating round the bar and hostesses dispensing beer and flirtation through the night.

Tarachan Restaurant, located in amongst the night-market stalls at 67/2 Thanon Dechanuchit, hosts *The Hua Hin Thai Show*, a changing programme of **Thai dance**, cabaret and music (Mon, Wed & Fri 8–9pm; B350 including set dinner or B200 with one free drink; Ⓦwww.huahinthaishow.com). The more upmarket Sasi Garden Theatre, near the *Hyatt Regency*, about 4km south of the *Sofitel*, stages a classical Thai dance performance with dinner nightly at 7pm (vegetarians catered for); book through any travel agent (B750 including set dinner and transfer; Ⓣ032 512488, Ⓦwww.sasi-restaurant.com). Tuesdays and Fridays are fight nights at the **Thai Boxing Garden** off Thanon Poonsuk (Ⓣ032 515269), with programmes starting at 9pm and featuring five different fights (B300); it's owned by local *muay thai* champion Khun Chop, who also runs Thai boxing classes most days at 5pm.

A Taste of Asia 42 Thanon Dechanuchit. Cosy, German-run Thai restaurant decorated with Thai folk paintings and artefacts and serving good-quality Thai food and seafood, including grilled white snapper, seafood salad, frogs legs, and locally famous desserts from nearby Phetchaburi (see p.269). Also has a good selection of imported wines and a few from Thailand. Most dishes from B150. Nightly 5–11pm.

Brasserie de Paris 3 Thanon Naretdamri. Refined French restaurant that's known for its seafood and has an appealing terrace over the water. Specialities include crab Hua Hin, *coquilles St Jacques* and *filet à la Provençal*. Mains come in at about B350, the seafood set menu is B595. Daily 11am–11pm.

Chao Lay 15 Thanon Naretdamri. Hua Hin's most famous jetty restaurant is deservedly popular, serving up a simple menu of high-quality seafood, including rock lobster, blue crab, scallops, cottonfish and mixed seafood platters. Most main dishes cost B100–200. Daily 11am–11pm.

Hua Hin Brewing Company In front of the *Hilton* on Thanon Naretdamri. Cavernous, half-timbered pub-restaurant that attempts to re-create the feel of a fisherman's tavern. There's live music nightly, plus a fairly pricey seafood-dominated menu, but the real attractions are the special beers produced by the in-house microbrewery: Sabai Sabai wheat beer, Elephant Tusk dark ale and Dancing Monkey lager. Nightly 5pm–2am.

Jasmine's 17/2 Soi Selakam. Classy but unpretentious restaurant serving good Thai food (most mains B150), lots of seafood, including especially good sea bass, as well as pizzas and steaks. Daily 11am–11pm.

La Villa 12/2 Thanon Poonsuk. Long-established and highly regarded Italian place that serves famously delicious home-made ice creams as well as a typical selection of mid-priced pizzas and pastas. Daily 11am–11pm.

Lung Ja Soi 72. One of several food-stall restaurants in the nightmarket that's so popular that its tables extend way back off the street. Cheap seafood is its big attraction. Nightly from 5pm.

Monsoon 62 Thanon Naretdamri. Atmospheric teakwood house, with brass fans, mellow lighting and a garden patio, that serves Thai and Vietnamese food, including Vietnamese *pho* (noodle soup), fresh spring rolls and *luc lac* (warm beef and watercress salad), as well as duck curry and seafood. Average price B150. Also serves afternoon tea. Daily from 3pm.

Satukarn Square At the Thanon Phetkasem/Damnern Kasem junction. Though it's not so much fun as the night market, nor as cheap, you can take your pick from twenty or so mid-priced little restaurants in this partially open-air plaza, where the choice includes Italian, Indian, German and seafood outlets. Nightly from around 4pm.

Som Moo Joom 51/6 Thanon Dechanuchit (corner of Thanon Naebkehat); no English sign. Exceptionally good seafood at very cheap prices has made this place extremely popular with Thai holidaymakers. The trademark dish is shrimp and seafood soups, but the menu also covers the range of standard seafood dishes. Decor is bare bones and indoor seating is available only from 6pm to 9pm nightly, after which it's pavement tables only.

Thanachote 11 Thanon Naretdamri. Atmospheric seafood restaurant, set on its own pier over the sea and serving great fish dishes from B250; shrimps from B60. Daily 10am–11pm.

White Lotus 17th Floor, *Hilton Hua Hin*, Thanon Naretdamri. Contemporary Chinese cuisine with unsurpassed seventeenth-floor views over the Hua Hin jetty restaurants and surrounding coastline. Highlights include wok-fried snow fish in black-bean sauce (B360) and New Zealand lamb with garlic and shaonsing sauce (B420), or you could splash out on a *degustation* menu (B900–1800). the Nightly from 5.30pm (come early to make the most of views) and also open for dim sum lunches at weekends 11.30am–2.30pm.

World News Coffee Thanon Naretdamri. The place to come for skinny lattes, sun-dried tomato bagels, cheesecakes, fresh vegetable juices, UK and US newspapers, Internet access – and a very large bill. Daily 8am–11pm.

Shopping

The most enjoyable places to shop for clothes and souvenirs (after 6pm only) are the stalls at the night market on the west end of Thanon Dechanuchit, the more upmarket little shops in the Night Plaza that runs off it, and the handful of stalls selling handicrafts and clothes among the restaurants in Satukarn Square at the Thanon Phetkasem/Thanon Damnern Kasem crossroads. There's a small outlet for the high-quality Jim Thompson silk and clothing franchise in the lobby area of the *Hilton* hotel on Thanon Naretdamri, but a more rewarding place to start any serious silk shopping is the **Rashnee Thai Silk Village** (daily 9am–6pm; ⓣ032 531155, ⓦwww.mikecompany.com) at 18 Thanon Naebkehat, about ten minutes' walk north from the town-centre clocktower, or phone for a free pick-up. Every visitor to the "village" (actually a series of open-air workshop pavilions and an air-conditioned shop) is given a free and well-explained guided tour of the entire silk production process, after which you are encouraged to pop in to the Rashnee tailors' shop and get yourself suited up.

Listings

Banks and exchange There are currency-exchange counters all over the resort, especially on Thanon Damnern Kasem and Thanon Naretdamri; most of the main bank branches with ATMs are on Thanon Phetkasem.

Books English-language books at the excellent Bookazine, on the corner of Damnern Kasem and Naretdamri; at several branches of Book Corner, on Thanon Phetkasem, Thanon Damnern Kasem and Thanon Dechanuchit; and in some minimarkets.

Car and motorbike rental Avis (ⓣ032 520009, ⓦwww.avis.com) has desks inside the *Hotel Sofitel* and the *Hilton*, and at the *Dusit Resort Hua Hin*, north of town (see p.271); several Hua Hin tour agencies also act as agents for Budget (ⓣ032 514220, ⓦwww.budget.co.th). The transport touts outside the *Hotel Sofitel* and across from the telephone office rent out 150cc bikes for around B200 a day.

Emergencies For all emergencies, call the tourist police on the free, 24hr phoneline (ⓣ1155), or contact them at their office opposite the *Sofitel* at the beachfront end of Thanon Damnern Kasem (ⓣ032 515995). The Hua Hin police station is further west on Damnern Kasem (ⓣ032 511027).

Hospitals The best private hospital in Hua Hin is the San Paulo, 222 Thanon Phetkasem (ⓣ032 532576–80), south of the tourist office, but for minor ailments there's also the reputable Hua Hin International Polyclinic (daily 8am–9pm; ⓣ032

516424) beside the Thai Farmers Bank on Thanon Phetkasem, which also offers dental services.

Internet access Available at several outlets in the resort, including on Thanon Phetkasem and, cheapest of all, at the CAT international phone office on Thanon Damnern Kasem (daily 8.30am–11pm).

Mail The GPO is on Thanon Damnern Kasem.

Pharmacy Several in the resort, including the very well-stocked Medihouse (daily 9.30am–10pm) opposite the *Hilton* on Thanon Naretdamri.

Spas Plenty of options, from the numerous cheap day-spa shops that offer foot massages and Thai massages in several town-centre locations on Thanon Naretdamri and Thanon Phetkasem, to the artfully designed luxury havens at Hua Hin's top hotels, notably the *Chiva-Som* (see p.276) and the *Anantara* (see p.276).

Telephones The CAT overseas telephone office (daily 8.30am–11pm) is on Thanon Damnern Kasem, next to the GPO.

Tour operators Western Tours, at 11 Thanon Damnern Kasem (Ⓣ032 533303, Ⓦwww.westerntourshuahin.com) sells air tickets, golf packages, and day-trips to Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park (B1300/person), Pala-u Falls (B1300), Damnoen Saduak Floating Market (B1800) and the rest. Toodtoo Tours, at 9/2 Soi Pharephan, off Thanon Naebkehat (Ⓣ032 530553, Ⓦwww.toodtoo.com), offers similarly priced day-trips as well as local elephant rides (from B640/30min). Sunseeker Tours, based inside Bookazine at 166 Thanon Naretdamri (Ⓣ032 533666, Ⓦwww.sunseekertours.com), offers cruises to local beaches on its yacht for around B2000 per person as well as fishing and snorkelling trips and a local sunset cruise around Khao Takiab.

Pak Nam Pran

The stretch of coast between Hua Hin and Chumphon barely registers on most foreign tourists' radar, but many better-off Bangkokians have favourite beaches in this area, the nicest of which is sophisticated **PAK NAM PRAN**. Just 33km south of Hua Hin, Pak Nam Pran used to cater only for families who owned beach villas here, but in the last few years the shorefront homes have been joined by a growing number of enticing, if pricey, boutique hotels, and signs are there's more development to come. For now, facilities consist of just a few minimarkets, car-rental outlets and independent restaurants, plus the possibility of organizing day-trips to nearby Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park (see p.282) through hotel staff. As along much of the Gulf coast, the beach itself is not exceptional (it has hardly any shade and is suffering from erosion in parts), but it is long and sandy, and nearly always empty, and you're quite likely to see dolphins playing within sight of the shore.

Practicalities

Pak Nam Pran beach (also known as Hat Naresuan) begins just south of the Pran River estuary and its eponymous town and runs south for around five kilometres to Khao Kalok headland and the tiny Thao Kosa Forest Park. Easiest **access** is via the town of **PRANBURI**, which straddles Highway 4 some 23km south of Hua Hin and is served by air-con buses from Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal (every 40min; 3hr 30min) as well as local buses from Hua Hin (every 20min; 40min), which drop passengers close by the town centre's main intersection. There's no public transport from Pranburi to Pak Nam Pran beach, 10km away, but hotels can arrange transfers, any Pranburi songthaew driver will taxi you there, or you could rent your own car or motorbike from Hua Hin. If making your own way, turn east off Highway 4 at Pranburi's town-centre traffic lights and then take minor road 3168 down to the sea (about 10km in all), picking up the relevant sign for your hotel. All the hotels are south of the little town of Pak Nam Pran.

Accommodation

Pak Nam Pran's charmingly characterful **accommodation** is its biggest draw: for once, "boutique" is the appropriate term, as many of the hotels here offer a dozen or fewer rooms, and the style tends to be more arty than five-star, though you will certainly be comfortable. Some hotels aren't suitable for kids owing to their multiple levels and unfenced flights of steps. Breakfast is generally included in the price of the room. During weekends in high season (Nov–May) you'll need to book ahead.

The *Evason* is the northernmost of the hotels (about 2km southeast of Pak Nam Pran town); the others are spread over a two-kilometre stretch of the beachfront road, starting about 2km south of the *Evason*.

Aleenta Central Pak Nam Pran beach ☎032 618333, Ⓦwww.aleenta.com. This stunningly designed tiny hotel is the sleekest outfit on the beach, comprising three gorgeous circular bungalows, each with an uninterrupted sea view, a deck and personal plunge pool, plus half a dozen other very tasteful villa-style rooms. The feel is modernist chic, with elegantly understated local furnishings and huge glass windows, and iPods and wi-fi capability rather than TVs in every room. There's a small rooftop pool, a spa and restaurant, plus a couple of family villas available for rent. ⑨

Evason Hua Hin Resort and Spa Far northern Pak Nam Pran beach, ☎032 632111, Ⓦwww.evasonresorts.com. With 185 rooms and a distinct resort atmosphere, the *Evason* is the biggest, best-known and most expensive hotel in Pak Nam Pran, but as accommodation is divided into discrete village areas and screened by graceful gardens, the feel is quite private and small-scale. For extra privacy you could check in to the *Hideaway* complex of super-luxe private-pool villas, the favourite choice of Thai film stars. All rooms are attractively cool and contemporary and have big balconies, TV and air-con. Facilities include a huge beachfront pool, two spa complexes, three restaurants, tennis courts, a kids' club and Internet access. Internet rates start at B6420, or B15,560 for *Hideaway* villas. ⑨

Huaplee Lazy Beach Central Pak Nam Pran beach ☎032 630555, Ⓦwww.huapleelazybeach.com. This exceptionally cute collection of eight idiosyncratic white-cube beachfront rooms is the work of the architect-interior designer owners. It's a characterful place of whimsical interiors done out with white-painted wood floors, blue-and-white colour schemes and funky shell and driftwood decor. All rooms are air-con and all but one has a sea view from its terrace/balcony. ⑧

Jamsawang Resort Northern Pak Nam Pran beach ☎032 570050, Ⓦwww.jamsawang.com. Currently the cheapest place to stay in the area, with just seventeen rooms in bungalows widely spaced around a neatly trimmed garden across the road from the beach. All rooms have air-con and TV, with half of them in comfortable if not especially sophisticated pale-blue concrete bungalows and the other half in pricier, more stylishly furnished yellow-painted bungalows, some with garden-style bathrooms. ⑥–⑧

Pran Havana Central Pak Nam Pran beach ☎032 570077, Ⓦwww.pranhavana.net. More white-cube architecture right next to *Huaplee* at this slightly bigger but equally charming beachfront accommodation, where the warren of individually furnished rooms is accessed by a series of whitewashed steps and sea-view terraces. Interiors are idiosyncratic seaside-chic, personalized with hand-crafted furnishings and artworks. The price depends on the view. ⑧–⑨

Eating

The shorefront **restaurant** *Khao Kalok* (unsigned in English), at the far southern end of Pak Nam Pran beach, about 1km south of *Huaplee*, *Pran Havana* and *Aleenta*, has an extensive menu of very good seafood dishes; mosquitoes are a problem here though, so take repellent. On the edge of Pak Nam Pran town, about 2km north of the *Evason*, *Krua Jao* (daily 9am–9pm) offers an enormous, mid-priced menu of 120 mostly fish and seafood dishes, including very good crab curry and pork with garlic. The restaurant is on the seafront road but accessible only via Pak Nam Pran town: from the main road through Pak Nam Pran head east down (signed) Soi Pasukvanich 16, which is opposite a gate in a large walled temple compound; when the soi emerges at the sea you'll find the restaurant immediately to your left – it's unsigned in English but you can't miss it. The *Evason*'s *The Other Restaurant* does posh Asian fusion cuisine (dinner only) and its wine list features 220 different bottles.

Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park

With a name that translates as "The Mountain with Three Hundred Peaks", **KHAO SAM ROI YOT NATIONAL PARK** (daily 6am–6pm; B200; Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp), 28km south of Pak Nam Pran beach or 63km south of Hua Hin, encompasses a small but varied coastal zone of just 98 square kilometres. The dramatic limestone crags after which it is named are the dominant feature, looming up to 650m above the Gulf waters and the forested interior, but perhaps more significant are the mud flats and freshwater marsh which attract and provide a breeding ground for thousands of migratory birds. **Bird-watching** at Thung Khao Sam Roi Yot swamp is a major draw, but the famously photogenic Phraya Nakhon Khiri cave is the focus of most day-trips, while a few decent trails and a couple of secluded beaches provide added interest.

The park

Khao Sam Roi Yot's most-visited attraction is the surprisingly worthwhile **Tham Phraya Nakhon** cave system, hidden high up on a cliffside above **Hat Laem Sala**, an unremarkable sandy bay at the base of a headland that's inaccessible to vehicles but has a park checkpoint, a restaurant and some national park bungalows. The usual way to get to Hat Laem Sala is by a five-minute boat-ride from the knot of food stalls behind Wat Bang Pu on the edge of **Ban Bang Pu** fishing village (6km from the park's northern checkpoint). Boat prices are fixed at B200 per boat for the round-trip visit to Hat Laem Sala. It's also possible to walk over the headland from behind Wat Bang Pu to Hat Laem Sala, along a signed, but at times steep, five-hundred-metre-long trail. From Hat Laem Sala, another taxing though shaded trail runs up the hillside to the Tham Phraya Nakhon caves and takes around thirty minutes.

The huge twin **caves** are filled with stalactites and stalagmites and wreathed in lianas and gnarly trees, but their most dramatic features are the partially collapsed roofs, which allow the sunlight to stream in and illuminate the interiors, in particular beaming down on the famous royal pavilion, Phra Thi Nang Khua Kharunhad, which was built in the second cave in 1890 in honour of Rama V. A three-hour trek south from Tham Phraya Nakhon brings you to **Tham Sai**, a genuinely dark and dank limestone cave, complete with stalactites, stalagmites and petrified waterfalls. The trek offers some fine coastal views, but a shorter alternative is the twenty-minute trail from **Ban Khung Tanot** village (accessible by road, 8km on from the Ban Bang Pu turn-off), where you can hire an essential flashlight and rent private bungalows (see opposite).

Another enjoyable activity is to charter a boat (B300/hour for up to ten people) from beside Wat Khao Daeng in the southern part of the park (1.5km from park HQ) and take a trip along the mangrove-fringed **Khao Daeng canal**; some Hua Hin and Hat Phu Noi tour companies also offer kayaking excursions here. You can scramble up **Khao Daeng** itself, a 322-metre-high outcrop that offers good summit views over the coast, from a thirty-minute trail that begins near the the park headquarters. The park's two official **nature trails** also start from close by HQ – the "Horseshoe Trail" takes in the forest habitats of monkeys, squirrels and songbirds, while the "Mangrove Trail" leads through the swampy domiciles of monitor lizards and egrets, with the chance of encountering long tailed (crab-eating) macaques.

The park hosts up to three hundred species of **bird** and between September and November the mud flats are thick with migratory flocks from Siberia, China and northern Europe. Khao Sam Roi Yot also contains Thailand's largest freshwater marsh, **Thung Khao Sam Roi Yot**, which is near the village of **Rong Jai** (Rong Che) in the north of the park, and accessed not from the main park road, but by turning east off Highway 4 200m north of kilometre-stone 276 and continuing 9km to the wetlands (it's outside the park boundary and not subject to the park entry fee). This is an excellent place for observing **waders** and **songbirds**, and is one of only two places in the country where the **purple heron** breeds; rangers rent out boats here for bird-watching excursions (B200/boat).

Practicalities

Like most of Thailand's national parks, Khao Sam Roi Yot is very hard to explore by public transport. The nearest **bus** drop is in Pranburi (see p.280), which is served by air-con buses from Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal (every 40min; 3hr 30min) and by local buses from Hua Hin (every 20min; 40min). Once in Pranburi, either charter a songthaew or motorbike taxi (B200–300) into the park, or use the limited local **songthaew** service, which runs hourly from 6am to noon from Pranburi market to the village of **Ban Bang Phu**, the access point for boats to Hat Laem Sala and the Phraya Nakhon Khiri cave – but note that the last return songthaew leaves Ban Bang Phu at 1pm and this option is only feasible if you're not interested in visiting any of the other sights in the park, all of which are spread too far apart to walk between. It's much easier either to join a one-day **tour** from Hua Hin (see p.272), Pak Nam Pran (see p.280) or Hat Phu Noi (see below) or to rent your own transport from Hua Hin. With your own wheels, take Highway 4 south to Pranburi, turn east at Pranburi's main intersection (kilometre-stone 254) and then follow the national-park signs to the **northern park checkpoint** 23km further south. All the main attractions are well signed from the main road through the park: it's 6km from the northern checkpoint to the departure point for boats to Hat Laem Sala and Phra Nakhon Khiri, and 14km to the **park headquarters** (Ⓣ032 619078), **trail heads**, **visitors' centre** and **southern park checkpoint** near the village of Khao Daeng. If coming from the south, turn off Highway 4 into the park at kilometre-stone 286.5, following signs to the southern park checkpoint and HQ, 13km further east. Rangers hand out rather sketchy **park maps** when you pay your entrance fee at the checkpoint.

Accommodation

The park's **accommodation** sites are near the headquarters at Khao Daeng, at Sam Phraya Beach, and at Laem Sala; at Laem Sala it's a choice between camping, at B125–250 per tent, or staying in one of the national park bungalows (from B1200), which sleep up to twenty people; at Sam Phraya it's camping only and at Khao Daeng it's bungalows only. Tents can be rented from the park headquarters but bungalows must be booked ahead through the central National Park office in Bangkok (Ⓣ02 562 0760, Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp; see Basics p.49 for booking advice), though they can be paid for at Khao Sam Roi Yot. It's also possible to stay in the privately run fan bungalows of *Kathom Tongsuk* (Ⓣ089 533 8664; ④), near Tham Sai in the village of Ban Khung Tanot.

Most people prefer to stay a few kilometres outside the park entrance at the more appealing, family-friendly hotels on the long, quiet, pleasingly shaded golden-sand beach of **HAT PHU NOI**, where dolphins are a daily sight from October to March – you may even spot the very rare, pink Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin – and there are plenty of opportunities to explore nearby islands and national park attractions. Hat Phu Noi is clearly signed off the road into the park, 4km before the northern checkpoint, and is at the end of a two-kilometre side road; hotels can arrange transfers from Pranburi or Hua Hin. At the northern end of

Hat Phu Noi, the long-running *Dolphin Bay Resort* (Ⓣ032 559333, Ⓦwww.dolphinbayresort.com; ⑥) has about sixty comfortable air-con rooms and bungalows ranged around a couple of swimming pools, plus a big restaurant with a bar, pool table and Internet access. The adjacent Dutch-run *Terra Selisa Bungalows* (Ⓣ032 559359, Ⓦwww.terraselisa.com; ⑥) is much smaller, with just twenty attractively furnished air-con bungalows set around a pool and garden, also just across the road from the beach. Both these hotels organize lots of **excursions** into the park, as well as dolphin-watching, sailing, snorkelling and squid-fishing trips, plus outings by boat or kayak to Monkey Island, just offshore. *Terra Selisa* also offers a dry-season trip to track wild elephants in nearby Kuiburi National Park (B600 per person, minimum four people), and *Dolphin Bay* rents out Hobie Cat sailing boats, speedboats, motorbikes and bicycles.

South to Chumphon

Most foreign tourists zip through the region immediately south of Khao Sam Roi Yot en route to the more obvious delights of the Ko Samui archipelago, but the unexpectedly charming seaside town of **Prachuap Khiri Khan** and the small beach resorts at **Ban Krud** and **Suan Luang** are worth investigating if you're happy to substitute good seafood and laid-back Thai hospitality for full-on resort facilities. Twenty-two kilometres south of Prachuap, Highway 4 passes through Wang Duan, where a sign announces the fact that this is the narrowest part of Thailand: just 10.96km of Thai land separates the Gulf of Thailand from the Burmese border at this point.

Prachuap Khiri Khan

Despite lacking any must-see attractions, the tiny provincial capital of **PRACHUAP KHIRI KHAN**, 67km south of Pranburi and 90km from Hua Hin, exudes a certain small-town charm and makes a pleasant place to break any journey up or down the coast; if nothing else, it's a great spot for a seafood lunch with a view. The town is contained in a small grid of streets that runs just 250m east to west, between the sea and the train station, and around 500m north to south, from the Khao Chong Krajok hill at the northern end to the air force base in the south.

Monkey-infested **Khao Chong Krajok** is Prachuap's main sight: if you climb the 417 steps from Thanon Salacheep to the golden-spired chedi at the summit you get a great perspective on the scalloped coast below and west to the mountainous Burmese border, just 12km away. At the far southern end of town, the long sandy beach at **Ao Manao** is the best place in the area for swimming and sunbathing. The bay is inside the air force base, so you usually need to sign in at the checkpoint two kilometres north of the beach itself. To get there, just head south down the town centre's Thanon Salacheep for about 4km until you get to the base sign and checkpoint. A tuk-tuk to the beach should cost around B50, or about B25 for a motorbike taxi. On weekdays you're likely to have the sand almost to yourself, but it's a very popular spot with Thai families at weekends when the stalls at the beachfront food centre do a roaring trade in the locally famous *som tam poo* (spicy papaya salad with fresh crab). At low tide you can walk out from Ao Manao along a sandy spit to an outcrop known as **Khao Lommuak**, where a memorial commemorates the battle that took place here between Thai and Japanese forces in World War II.

About 12km south of town in **WA KO** (Waghor), east off Highway 4 at kilometre-marker 335, the **King Mongkut Memorial Park of Science and Technology** (also signed as Phra Chomklao Science Park; daily 8.30am–4.30pm; currently free but tickets are due to be introduced) features the pretty well stocked **Waghhor Aquarium** as well as some exhibits on astronomy, presented here to honour the scientifically minded Rama IV, who accurately predicted the total solar eclipse of August 1868 and came here to observe it.

Practicalities

Prachuap **train station** (Ⓣ032 611175) is on the edge of town at the western end of Thanon Kongkiat, which runs east down to the sea and the main pier. The **non-air-con bus stop**, for services (most frequent in the morning) to Chumphon, Pranburi and Hua Hin, is one block east of the train station and two blocks north, on Thanon Phitak Chat. Second-class **air-con buses** to Bangkok via Hua Hin and Phetchaburi (every 30min) and first-class services direct to Bangkok (hourly) leave from two offices 100m further south down Thanon Phitak Chat (one block south of Thanon Kongkiat). For the fastest service to Chumphon and Surat Thani you need to wait on Highway 4 at the Highway Police office, about 1km north of the access road into town, for the air-con buses that whizz down from Bangkok; several southbound services pick up passengers here between 8.30am and 11.30am (and many more around midnight).

There's a small, clued-up **tourist information** office (daily 8.30am–4.30pm; Ⓣ032 611491) at the far northern end of town in a little compound of municipal offices that sits between Thanon Susuek (Sooseuk) and beachfront Thanon Chai Thaleh; it's housed in the white Thai-style building with a blue roof, about 200m northeast of the non-air-con bus terminal, or 350m from the train station. The **post and telephone office**, directly behind the *Hadthong Hotel* on Thanon Susuek, has a couple of Catnet **Internet** terminals upstairs (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm, Sat & Sun 9am–noon), or there's a private Internet place one block west and around the corner to the left on Thanon Salacheep, which keeps longer hours. There's **currency exchange** on Thanon Kongkiat, between the train station and the sea, and several ATMs on the main stretch of Thanon Phitak Chat. Prachuap government **hospital** (Ⓣ032 601060-4) is a couple of blocks south of the air-con bus offices on Thanon Phitak Chat.

Accommodation

The cheapest and most traveller-oriented **place to stay** in town is the friendly *Prachuapsuk Hotel* at 69 Thanon Susuek (Ⓣ032 611019, Ⓕ032 601711; fan ②, air-con ③), where the en-suite rooms are simple but large and come with either fan or air-con. It's 50m south of the post office or about 300m southeast of the train station. Fan and air-con rooms at the larger *Suksant Hotel*, located at 11 Thanon Susuek, but also accessible from the beachfront road (Ⓣ032 611145, Ⓕ032 601208; ③), are more expensive but not as inviting, though the upper floors do have very nice sea views. Nearby *Hadthong Hotel*, at 21 Thanon Susuek, but also with an entrance on the beachfront road (Ⓣ032 601050, Ⓦwww.hadthong.com; ④–⑤), is a better maintained and more comfortable variation on the same theme, with bigger balconies and equally nice sea views in the more expensive rooms, air-con all round – and a swimming pool. For more of a real beach scene, the air force hotel *Akan Ti Pak Sawatdikan* (Ⓣ032 661088; ⑤) has air-con rooms all with sea view on the seafront in Ao Manao.

Eating

Prachuap's famously good seafood is most cheaply sampled at the town's two main **night markets**. The cheaper, more varied stalls set up in the empty lot around the junction of the pier road, Thanon Kongkiat, and Thanon Phitak Chat; the more upscale version, with sit-down seafood stalls, menus in English and a couple of makeshift bars alongside, occupies the stretch of Thanon Susuek that runs alongside the small park, just north of Thanon Kongkiat and the pier. Otherwise there are several well-regarded seafood **restaurants** along Thanon Chai Thaleh, including *Pan Pochana*, south of the pier and next to the *Suksant Hotel*, where dishes range from shrimp and crab salads to fried sea asparagus and plenty of squid, and the shady terrace commands a perfect bay view. Almost next door, alongside the *Hadthong Hotel*, *Plern Smut* (English-sign at the Thanon Susuek entrance only, not on the beachfront road) has famously delicious pan-fried oysters on its seafood-dominated menu.

Ban Krud

Graced with a tranquil, five-kilometre sweep of white sand, pale-blue sea and swaying casuarinas, **BAN KRUD** (Ban Krut), 70km south of Prachuap, is scenic and quite popular. A dozen or so fairly upmarket bungalow outfits and seafood restaurants line the central stretch of beachfront road, whose northern headland, **Khao Thongchai**, is dominated by the fourteen-metre-high Phra Phut Kitti Sirichai Buddha image and its sparkling modern temple, Wat Phra Mahathat Phraphat. Crowned with nine golden chedis, the temple displays an impressive fusion of traditional and contemporary features, including a series of charming modern stained-glass windows depicting Buddhist stories; reach it via a 1500-metre-long road that spirals up from the beachfront. Other than a visit to the temple and possibly a snorkelling trip to nearby Ko Lamla (about B400/person), the main pastime in Ban Krud is sitting under the trees and enjoying a long seafood lunch or dinner (the casuarinas are lit with fairylights at night).

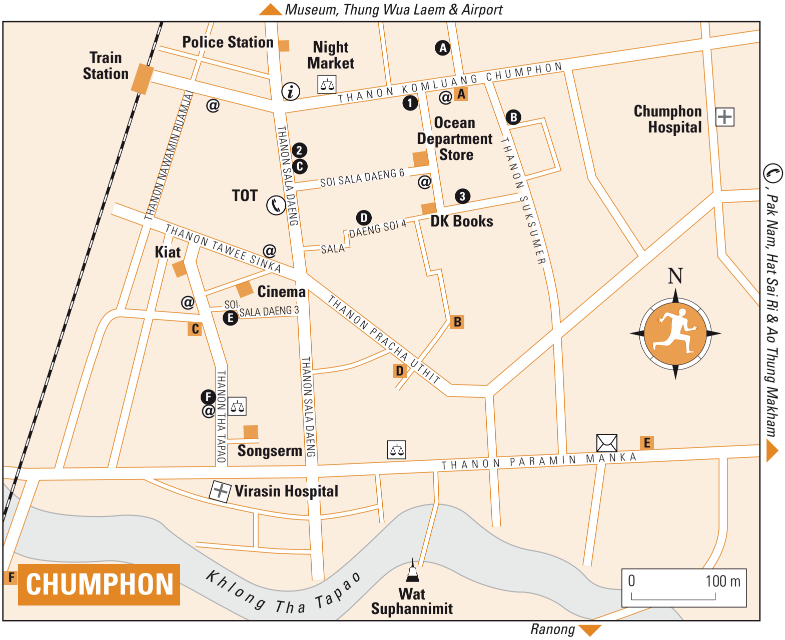
Most southbound **buses** drop passengers at the Ban Krud junction on Highway 4, from where motorbike taxis cover the twelve kilometres down to the beach. Ban Krud **train** station is about 3km from the beach. *Bann Kruit Youth Hostel* (Ⓣ032 619103, Ⓦwww.thailandbeach.com; ③–④), north of the Big Buddha headland, about 2.5km from the central area, is one of the best, and priciest, youth hostels in the country. It occupies an effectively private chunk of very good beach, and offers air-con, two-person **bungalows** right on the shore, a range of other garden-view, fan bungalows and air-con dorms (B200/bed), wheelchair accessible accommodation, plus a swimming pool and bicycle rental. More central is the friendly and clued-up *Sala Thai* (Ⓣ032 695182, Ⓦwww.resortinthai.com; ④–⑥) in the main beach area, whose wooden bungalows with air-con and TV are spread under the coconut trees just across the road from the beach. Another popular option is the German-run *Baanklangaow Beach Resort* (Ⓣ032 695123, Ⓦwww.baanklangaowresort.com; ⑦), a big compound of air-conditioned wooden chalets set in a mature tropical garden across the road from the sea and located 2km south of the central resort area. Facilities include two swimming pools, table tennis, a restaurant, Internet access, bicycle and kayak rental and the **dive company** Absolut Wreck (Ⓣ081 316 6009, Ⓦwww.absolutwreck.com).

Suan Luang

Thirty kilometres south down the coast from Ban Krud, the beach at **SUAN LUANG** is scruffy and has a slight air of abandonment, but for some this is part of its appeal, and there are a couple of pleasant places to stay here. About 750m before you hit the coast, laid-back, traveller-oriented *Suan Luang Resort* (Ⓣ032 691663; ③–④) has fourteen fan and air-con bungalows widely spaced around a peaceful garden, a very good restaurant, pool and table-tennis tables, motorbike rental, and masses of information on the local area. Down on the beach, the French-run mini-resort *Coral Hotel* (☎ 032 691667, ⓦ www.coral-hotel.com; ⑥–⑧) also offers very good facilities, including a huge pool, sauna, games room and fitness centre, Internet access, two restaurants and a range of rooms and bungalows, all with air-con and TV. *Coral* runs a big programme of day-trips, adventure-sports activities and diving excursions. Access to Suan Luang is by **train** or bus to Bang Saphan Yai, about 7km from Suan Luang; hotels will collect guests on request.

Chumphon and around

South Thailand officially starts at **CHUMPHON**, where the main highway splits into west- and east-coast branches, and inevitably the provincial capital saddles itself with the title "gateway to the south". Most tourists take this tag literally and use the town as nothing more than a transport interchange between the Bangkok train and **boats to Ko Tao** (see p.289), so the town is well equipped to serve these passers-through, offering clued-up travel agents, efficient transport links and plenty of Internet cafés. As for reasons to stick around, there are average **beaches** north and south of town and a few offshore reefs worth diving and snorkelling, but


Museum, Thung Wua Laem & Airport
Train Station
Police Station
Night Market
Thanon Komluang Chumphon
Ocean Department Store
Chumphon Hospital
Thanon Nawamin Ruamjai
Thanon Sala Daeng
Soi Sala Daeng 6
TOT
Thanon Suksumer
Sala Daeng Soi 4
DK Books
Thanon Tawee Sinka
Kiat
Cinema
Soi Sala Daeng 3
Thanon Pracha Uthit
N
Thanon Tha Tapao
Thanon Sala Daeng
Songserm
Thanon Paramin Manka
Virasin Hospital
CHUMPHON
Khlong Tha Tapao
Wat Suphannimit
0 100 m
Pak Nam, Hat Sai Ri & Ao Thung Makham
Ranong
A B C D E F 1 2 3

ACCOMMODATION

Easy Divers	F	Paradorn Inn	D
Fame	C	Siam Dreams	B
New Chumphon Guest House	A	Suda Guest House	E

RESTAURANTS & BARS

Fame	C
Green Kitchen	3
Papa Seafood	1
Raan Ahaan Mangsawirat Vegetarian Food	2

TRANSPORT TERMINALS

Government bus station (temporary)	F	Chokeanan Tour buses to Bangkok and Phuket	B
Air-con minibuses to Surat Thani	A	Songthaews to Thung Wua Laem	D
Air-con minibuses to Ranong	C	Songthaews to Pak Nam, Hat Sai Ri & Ao Thung Makham Noi	E

perhaps the most rewarding direction for day-trippers is inland, through Chumphon province's famously abundant fruit orchards to **Pha To** and the **Lang Suan River**. If you're looking for something to do on a rainy day (of which Chumphon has quite a high number), you could visit the moderately interesting **Chumphon National Museum** (Wed–Sun 9am–4pm; B30; Ⓦwww.thailandmuseum.com), 3km north of town, in a compound of municipal buildings on the road to Thung Wua Laem beach and served by the same yellow songthaews from Thanon Pracha Uthit. Its displays summarize the history of the province from prehistoric times through to the modern day and include a "before-and after" diorama presentation (shown only at 10am and 2pm) on the devastation wreaked on Chumphon in 1989 by Typhoon Gay, and a feature on the arrival of invading Japanese forces at Chumphon and several other places on December 8, 1941.

Arrival, information and transport

Chumphon **train station** (Ⓣ077 511103) is on the northwest edge of town, less than ten minutes' walk from most guest houses and hotels. The government **bus station** (Ⓣ077 576796) is currently temporarily located just south of the river, though some bus drivers drop passengers on Thanon Tha Tapao first. There are also several private **air-con bus and minibus** services that leave from other parts of town (see map for locations), including air-con minibuses to Surat Thani (every 30min); air-con minibuses to Ranong (hourly); and Chokeanan Tour air-con buses to Bangkok (4 daily; Ⓣ077 511757). There are currently no scheduled flights in and out of Chumphon **airport**, 35km north of town; taking the overnight train to or from Bangkok is the most comfortable alternative.

The municipal **tourist information** centre is conveniently located about 175m east of the train station, at the junction of Thanon Komluang Chumphon and Thanon Sala Daeng (Mon–Fri 8.30am–7.30pm; Ⓣ077 511730, Ⓔchumphon@mots.go.th), though staff here are rarely as clued-up on the essentials as the town's league of **travel agents,** most of whom have offices on Thanon Tha Tapao. As well as flogging Ko Tao boat tickets, these places all sell bus tickets, and many also book accommodation on Ko Phayam, near Ranong off the Andaman coast (see p.364), offer day-trip programmes including rafting at Pha To (B800, minimum 5 people; see p.290), do visa runs to Burma via Ranong (B600 excluding B300 visa), and will store luggage free of charge; some also offer free showers to travellers who've bought tickets from them and are awaiting onward connections. Agents on Thanon Tha Tapao include Ko Tao ferry operator Songserm Travel (24hr; Ⓣ077 506205), whose staff let travellers nap on the office floor while waiting for the boat; Easy Divers (Ⓣ077 570085), which has a cheap accommodation above its office (see below); and Kiat (Ⓣ077 502127, Ⓔsomkia_t@hotmail.com).

Accommodation

Chumphon's **guest houses** are well used to accommodating Ko Tao-bound travellers, so most are happy to store luggage until the night boat leaves and offer shower services to non-guests for B20–30.

Easy Divers Ⓣ077 570085, Ⓦwww.chumphoneasydivers.com. Exceptionally cheap, mostly windowless rooms above the tour agency and dive centre, all with shared bathrooms. ①

Fame 188/20-21 Thanon Sala Daeng Ⓣ077 51077, Ⓔakeychumphon@hotmail.com. Above the restaurant and tour agency of the same name, this place has good-sized and very clean rooms with mattresses on the floor and fans; some have attached bathrooms. Share bathroom ①, en suite ②

New Chumphon Guest House (aka *Miao*) Soi 1, Thanon Komluang Chumphon Ⓣ077 502900. Popular place (especially with Germans) on a quiet, residential soi with a pleasant outdoor seating area and an interesting programme of treks and day-trips. Rooms all share facilities and the price depends on the size of the room. ①

Paradorn Inn 180/12 Thanon Paradorn, east off Thanon Sala Daeng ☎077 511598, Ⓦwww.chumphon-paradorn.com. The best value of the town's mid-range hotels: all rooms have air-con and TV, and the VIP ones are refurbished and the poshest in town. There's a restaurant too. Air-con ③, VIP ④

Siam Dreams 116/31 Thanon Suksumer ☎077 571790. Variously sized rooms with fans and shared bathrooms. Phone the owner's mobile ☎087 269 3668 for free transfer from bus or train station. ①–②

Suda Guest House Thanon Sala Daeng Soi 3 (aka Soi Bangkok Bank), 30m off Thanon Tha Tapao ☎077 504366. Chumphon's most genuine and welcoming homestay, offering just four clean and well-maintained fan and air-con rooms with shared bathroom in the owner's own modern house. Plenty of info available, B20 showers for passers-through, motorbikes for rent, jungle treks, boat tickets and day-trips. Phone ☎089 970 0304 for free transport from train or bus station. Fan ②, air-con ②

Around Chumphon: beaches and islands

Chumphon's best beach is **THUNG WUA LAEM**, 12km north of town and served by frequent yellow songthaews (B25–30) from halfway down Thanon Pracha Uthit. The long sandy stretch has a few bungalow resorts and a handful of fairly pricey seafood restaurants with beachfront tables. A shop close to *Clean Wave* bungalows rents out sea canoes, bicycles and motorbikes and *Chumphon Cabana* also rents bicycles (B50/hr). The biggest and most popular **place to stay** on Thung Wua Laem is the ecologically conscious *Chumphon Cabana* (☎077 560245, Ⓦwww.cabana.co.th; ⑥–⑦), whose low-rise buildings are energy-efficient and comfortable, if not exactly stylish. Rooms all have air-con, TV and balcony, and there are some cheaper fan bungalows too. The resort has a big pool, two restaurants and an excellent programme of day-trips, including Lang Suan river-rafting at Pha To (see below), squid-trapping and firefly-watching. There's also a **dive centre** (late April–Sept only) here, which does trips to nearby islands for B1950 per diver and B680 per snorkeller, Openwater courses for B13,500 including four nights' accommodation and full board, and live-aboards to Ko Tao and Ang Thong. *Chumphon Cabana* runs shuttle buses between the resort and Chumphon. Cheaper places to stay include the (slightly musty) fan rooms and large, more airy

Boats to Ko Tao

There are several different **boat services from Chumphon to Ko Tao**, tickets for all of which are sold by all travel agents and most guest houses in town. The fastest service is **Lomprayah Catamaran** (daily at 7am and 1pm; 1hr 30min–2hr; B550 including transport to the pier; ☎077 558212, Ⓦwww.lomprayah.com), which departs from the pier beside *MT Resort* at Ao Thung Makham Noi (see p.290), 25km south of Chumphon, but cannot sail in windy weather. All other services depart from Pak Nam port, 14km southeast of Chumphon, including **Songserm express** (7am; 2hr 30min; B400, also does through-tickets to Ko Pha Ngan for an extra B250 and Ko Samui for an extra B400; ☎077 506205). A Songserm bus meets all the morning trains from Bangkok and takes passengers to their office in town, from where there's onward transport to the Pak Nam ferry port at about 6.20am; Songserm will pick up from guest houses in town as well. There are also two late-night services from Pak Nam, both of which do pick-ups from town guest houses at around 10pm (B50 per person) and which run in all but the very worst weather. Of these, the slightly pricier **Ko Jaroen car ferry** (daily at 11pm; 6hr; B300 plus B50 for transport to the pier; ☎077 580030) is more comfortable and has blankets and pillows for passengers; cheapest of all is the **smaller midnight boat** (daily at midnight; 6hr; B200 plus B50 for transport to the pier; ☎077 521615).

air-con bungalows set round a garden at *Clean Wave* (ⓣ077 560151; fan ②, air-con ⑤), halfway down the beach, and towards the far northern, quietest, end of the beach, fairly basic fan and slightly better air-con bungalows just 30m across the road from the sea at *Sea Beach* (ⓣ07 560115; fan ②, air-con ④). *New Chumphon Guest House* in town (see p.288) also rents rooms in their *New Miao House* a few hundred metres inland from the beach, for travellers staying three days or more (②–③).

About 25km south of town, peaceful, palm-fringed **AO THUNG MAKHAM NOI** is one half of a double bay, with its larger twin, Ao Thung Makham Yai (site of Wat Pong Pang and its cave containing a large Buddha image), visible just over the headland to the south. There's hardly any development save for *MT Resort*, sometimes known as *Mother Hut* (ⓣ077 558153, ⓦwww.mtresort-chumphon.com; ⑦), which has just nine attractive air-con chalets set around a beachside garden and restaurant; rooms have cable TV and rates include free use of kayaks. There's plenty of local info available, plus motorbike rental, snorkelling trips and fishing outings. The Lomprayah catamaran pier for the fastest service to Ko Tao (see p.289) is just a few metres from *MT*. To get to Ao Thung Makham Noi from Chumphon, either take one of the songthaews from Thanon Paramin Manka or call *MT* for a pick-up.

Nearly all Chumphon's guest houses and tour agencies offer snorkelling trips to nearby **islands** (most of which lie within Mu Ko Chumphon National Park, so you may have to pay the B200 national park fee on top of the tour price). *Chumphon Cabana* on Thung Wua Laem also organizes diving trips. The reefs and underwater caves around **Ko Ngam Yai** and **Ko Ngam Noi**, about 18km offshore, are particularly good for divers, who are likely to see hawksbill turtles, large rays and nudibranchs. More rewarding for snorkellers is the shallower kilometre-long reef at **Ko Lawa**, about half an hour by longtail from Ao Thung Makham Noi.

Inland to Pha To

Though Chumphon province may not be renowned for its beaches and islands, its reputation as a major **fruit-growing** region is well established, and a great way to appreciate this is to head inland for some gentle **rafting on the Lang Suan River** near Pha To, and perhaps a stay at a lodge in a nearby village. All tour agencies and most guest houses offer rafting for around B1000 per person, depending on the size of the group. Or you can do it with your own transport by heading south down Highway 41 for 71km and then continuing west along Highway 4006 for 26km until you reach Pha To. Highway 4006 winds its exceptionally scenic way through endless plantations of trees bearing papayas, mangosteens, durians, bananas, rambutans, pomelos and coconuts, plus the occasional *robusta* coffee field as well (over fifty percent of Thailand's *robusta* coffee crop is grown in Chumphon).

At **PHA TO**, about 300m west of the roadside Pha To post office, a left turn takes you into the tiny town centre, where Malin Rafting (ⓣ077 539053), easily spotted from the dozens of lifejackets outside, offers rafting trips, including transport, local lunch at a fruit farm, and a couple of hours' floating down the pretty if not spectacular Lang Suan River, for B500 per person (minimum six people, book the day before). There are plenty of chances to swim in the river, and it's good fun for kids too. Also based near Pha To is the Thai-Dutch eco-tourism outfit Runs 'N Roses (ⓣ086 172 1090, ⓦwww.runsnroses.com), which, as well as offering bamboo and wildwater rafting, treks and mountain-bike rental, also has **accommodation** in its tiny lodge 9km from Pha To (B850 for two people including all meals), runs a homestay programme (B250 per person all-inclusive), and does half-day and one-day Thai cooking, cultural and language **workshops** for adults and kids (B300–500). Profits support the **Thai Child Development Foundation** (Ⓦwww.thaichilddevelopment.org), which helps house and educate needy local children; the foundation welcomes donations and volunteers – see Basics p.75 for more details.

Eating and drinking

The cheapest place to eat is the **night market**, which sets up along both sides of Thanon Komluang Chumphon and is an enjoyable place to munch your way through a selection of fried noodles, barbecued chicken and sticky, coconut-laced sweets. For live music with your beer, head down to the wood-fronted, country-style pub *Montana*, at the north end of Thanon Suksumer (nightly 6pm–1am).

Fame 188/20-21 Thanon Sala Daeng. Travellers' restaurant (plus guesthouse, boat tickets, tours and Internet access) serving pizzas topped with imported cheeses (B170), Indian dhal, loads of sandwiches, and huge American and veggie breakfasts (B90–120).

Green Kitchen Behind *Jansom Chumphon Hotel,* off Thanon Suksumer/Thanon Sala Daeng. Upscale Thai and Vietnamese food served daily 10am–10pm.

Papa Seafood Thanon Komluang Chumphon. One of the liveliest places to eat dinner is this huge, open-sided restaurant, which has an extensive menu of fresh seafood priced by weight, plenty of Western standards – and singers most evenings.

Puen Jai Across from the train station on Thanon Komluang Chumphon. An upmarket garden restaurant that also caters to hungry backpackers, serving pizza and home-baked bread as well as Thai food, and offering Internet access, free showers and left-luggage storage for diners passing through.

Raan Ahaan Mangsawirat Vegetarian Food Right next to *Fame* on Thanon Sala Daeng. Tiny place offering ready-cooked Thai-Chinese vegetarian food at B10–15 per serving. Daily 7am to about 3pm.

Listings

Airline tickets International and domestic tickets through travel agents Kiat Travel and Songserm, both on Thanon Tha Tapao (see p.288); some international tickets take 48 hours to issue from Bangkok.

Banks and exchange The main banks, with exchange counters and ATMs, are on Thanon Sala Daeng and Thanon Pracha Uthit.

Books DK Books, opposite the *Jansom Chumphon* hotel, has a stand of English-language books upstairs, and sells the *Bangkok Post*.

Car and motorbike rental Jeeps (B1200/24hr) and minibus plus driver (B1500/day) from Kiat, 115 Thanon Thatapao (Ⓣ077 502127, Ⓦwww.chumphonguide.com). Motorbikes from any travel agency and most guest houses (B200/day).

Emergencies For all emergencies, call the tourist police on the free, 24hr phoneline Ⓣ1155, or contact the Chumphon police station on the north end of Thanon Sala Daeng (Ⓣ077 511300).

Hospitals The private Virasin Hospital (Ⓣ077 503238–40) is off the southern end of Thanon Tha Tapao, and the government Chumphon Hospital (Ⓣ077 503672–4) is on the northeast edge of town.

Internet access Available all over town: see map for locations.

Mail The GPO is on the southeastern edge of town, on Thanon Paramin Manka (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm, Sat 9am–noon).

Pharmacy On Thanon Sala Daeng.

Telephones The TOT overseas phone centre and card phones are near the *Suriwong Chumphon* hotel on Thanon Sala Daeng (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm).

Chaiya and around

About 140km south of Chumphon, **CHAIYA** was the capital of southern Thailand under the Srivijayan empire, which fanned out from Sumatra between the eighth and thirteenth centuries. Today there's little to mark the passing of the Srivijayan civilization, but this small, sleepy town has gained new fame as the site of **Wat Suan Mokkh**, a progressively minded temple whose meditation retreats account for the bulk of Chaiya's foreign visitors. Unless you're interested in one of the retreats, the town is best visited on a day-trip, either as a break in the journey south, or as an excursion from Surat Thani.

Chaiya is 3km east of Highway 41, the main road down this section of the Gulf coast: **buses** running between Chumphon and Surat Thani will drop you off on the highway, from where you can catch a motorbike taxi or walk into town; from Surat Thani's Talat Kaset II bus station, hourly air-con minibuses and more frequent but slower songthaews take around an hour to reach Chaiya. The town also lies on the main Southern Rail Line, though many **trains** from Bangkok arrive in the middle of the night.

The Town

The main sight in Chaiya is **Wat Phra Boromathat** on the western side of town, where the ninth-century chedi – one of very few surviving examples of Srivijayan architecture – is said to contain relics of the Buddha himself. Hidden away behind the viharn in a pretty, red-tiled cloister, the chedi looks like an oversized wedding cake surrounded by an ornamental moat. Its unusual square tiers are spiked with smaller chedis and decorated with gilt, in a style similar to the temples of central Java.

The **National Museum** (Wed–Sun 9am–4pm; B30; Ⓦ www.thailandmuseum.com), on the eastern side of the temple, is a bit of a disappointment. Although the Srivijaya period produced some of Thailand's finest sculpture, much of it discovered at Chaiya, the best pieces have been carted off to the National Museum in Bangkok. Replicas have been left in their stead, which are shown alongside fragments of some original statues, two intricately worked 2000-year-old bronze drums, found at Chaiya and Ko Samui, and various examples of Thai handicrafts. The best remaining pieces are a calm and elegant sixth- to seventh-century stone image of the Buddha meditating from Wat Phra Boromathat, and an equally serene head of a Buddha image, Ayutthayan-style in pink sandstone, from **Wat Kaeo**, an imposing ninth- or tenth-century brick chedi on the south side of town. Heading towards the centre from Wat Phra Boromathat, you can reach this chedi by taking the first paved road on the right, which brings you first to the restored base of the chedi at Wat Long, and then after 1km to Wat Kaeo, enclosed by a thick ring of trees. Here you can poke around the murky antechambers of the chedi, three of which house images of the Buddha subduing Mara.

Wat Suan Mokkh

The forest temple of **Wat Suan Mokkh** (Garden of Liberation), 6km south of Chaiya on Highway 41, was founded by **Buddhadasa Bhikkhu**, southern Thailand's most revered monk until his death in 1993 at the age of 87. His back-to-basics philosophy, encompassing Christian, Zen and Taoist influences, lives on and continues to draw Thais from all over the country to the temple, as well as hundreds of foreigners. It's not necessary to sign up for one of the wat's retreats to enjoy the temple, however – all buses from Surat Thani to Chaiya and Chumphon pass the wat, so it's easy to drop by for a quiet stroll through the wooded grounds.

The layout of the wat is centred on the Golden Hill: scrambling up between trees and monks' huts, past the cremation site of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, you'll reach a hushed clearing on top of the hill, which is the temple's holiest meeting-place, a simple open-air platform decorated with images of Buddha and the Wheel of Law. At the base of the hill, the outer walls of the Spiritual Theatre are lined with bas-reliefs, replicas of originals in India, which depict scenes from the life of the Buddha. Inside, every centimetre is covered with colourful didactic painting, executed by resident monks and visitors in a jumble of realistic and surrealistic styles.

Meditation retreats

Meditation retreats are led by Western and Thai teachers over the first ten days of every month at the International Dharma Heritage, a purpose-built compound 1km from the main temple at Wat Suan Mokkh. Large numbers of foreign travellers, both novices and experienced meditators, turn up for the retreats, which are intended as a challenging exercise in mental development – it's not an opportunity to relax and live at low cost for a few days. Conditions imitate the rigorous lifestyle of a *bhikkhu* (monk) as far as possible, each day beginning before dawn with meditation according to the Anapanasati method, which aims to achieve mindfulness by focusing on the breathing process. Although talks are given on Dharma (the doctrines of the Buddha – as interpreted by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu) and meditation technique, most of each day is spent practising Anapanasati in solitude. To aid concentration, participants maintain a rule of silence, broken only by daily chanting sessions, although supervisors are available for individual interviews if there are any questions or problems. Men and women are segregated into separate dormitory blocks and, like monks, are expected to help out with chores.

Each course has space for about one hundred people – turn up at the information desk in Wat Suan Mokkh as early as possible on the last day of the month to enrol. The fee is B1500 per person, which includes two vegetarian meals a day and accommodation in simple cells. Bring torch (or buy one outside the temple gates) and any other supplies you'll need for the ten days – participants are encouraged not to leave the premises during the retreat. For further information, go to Ⓦ www.suanmokkh.org or telephone Ⓣ 077 431597.

Surat Thani

Uninspiring **SURAT THANI** ("City of the Good People"), 60km south of Chaiya, is generally worth visiting only as the jumping-off point for the Samui archipelago. Strung along the south bank of the Tapi River, with a busy port for rubber and coconuts near the river mouth, the town is experiencing rapid economic growth and paralysing traffic jams. It might be worth a stay, however, when the Chak Phra Festival (see box) is on, or as a base for seeing the nearby historic town of Chaiya.

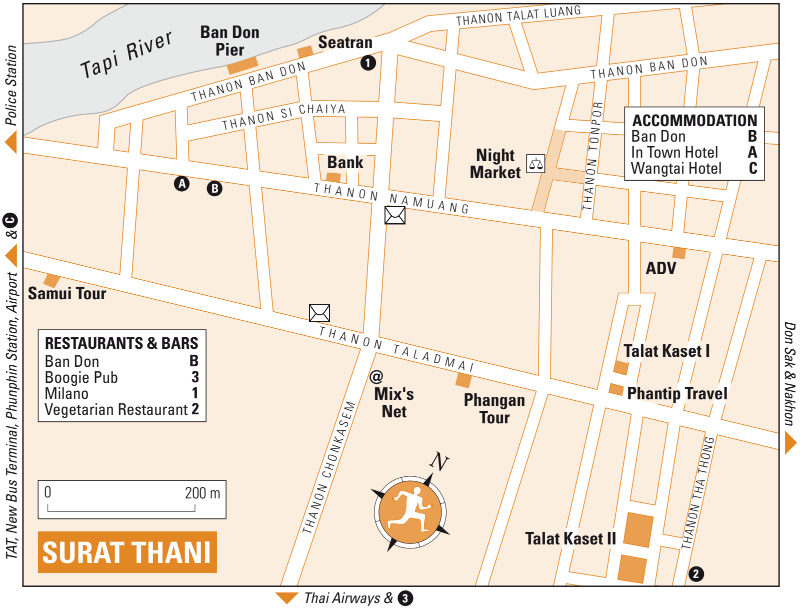
The Chak Phra Festival

At the start of the eleventh lunar month (usually in October) the people of Surat Thani celebrate the end of Buddhist Lent with the **Chak Phra Festival** (Pulling the Buddha), which symbolizes the Buddha's return to earth after a monsoon season spent preaching to his mother in heaven. On the Tapi River, tugboats pull the town's principal Buddha image on a raft decorated with huge nagas, while on land sleigh-like floats bearing Buddha images and colourful flags and parasols are hauled across the countryside and through the streets. As the monks have been confined to their monasteries for three months, the end of Lent is also the time to give them generous offerings in the *kathin* ceremony, of which Surat Thani has its own version, called Thot Pha Pa, when the offerings are hung on tree branches planted in front of the houses before dawn. Longboat races, between teams from all over the south, are also held during the festival.

Practicalities

Buses to Surat Thani arrive at three different locations, two of which are on Thanon Taladmai in the centre of town: at Talat Kaset I on the north side of the road (Phunphin and one or two other local buses) and opposite at Talat Kaset II (many long-distance buses, including those from Krabi, Phang Nga, Phuket, Ranong, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Hat Yai). The new bus terminal, 2km southwest of the centre on the road towards Phunphin, handles mostly services from Bangkok; Talat Kaset II buses going to or from places to the west such as Krabi, Phang Nga and Phuket also make a stop here. Arriving by **train** means arriving at **Phunphin**, 13km to the west, from where buses run into Surat Thani every ten minutes or so between around 5.30am and 7.30pm, while share-taxis (based in Surat at Talat Kaset II) charge B100 to charter the whole car into town; many buses heading west out of Surat also make a stop at Phunphin station, which might save you a journey into town and out again. It's also possible to buy through-tickets to Ko Samui and Ko Pha Ngan from the train station for the same price as they would be from Surat Thani town, including a connecting bus to the relevant pier. If you're planning to leave by train, booking tickets at Phantip Travel, in front of Talat Kaset I at 293/6–8 Thanon Taladmai (ⓣ077 272230 or 077 272906), will save an extra trip to Phunphin.

Details of **boats** to **Ko Samui**, **Ko Pha Ngan** and **Ko Tao** are given in the account of each island – see p.297, p.319 and p.332. Phunphin and the bus stations are teeming with touts, with transport waiting to escort you to their employer's boat service to the islands – they're generally reliable, but make sure you don't get talked onto the wrong boat. If you manage to avoid getting hustled, you can buy tickets direct from the boat operators: Seatran, on Thanon Ban Don near the night-boat pier (ⓣ077 215555, ⓦwww.seatranferry.com), has vehicle ferries to Samui and Pha Ngan (with connecting buses) from Don Sak, 68km east of Surat;


SURAT THANI
Tapi River
Ban Don Pier
Seatran
1
THANON TALAT LUANG
THANON BAN DON
THANON SI CHAIYA
Bank
THANON NAMUANG
Night Market
THANON TONPOR
ACCOMMODATION
Ban Don B
In Town Hotel A
Wangtai Hotel C
A
B
Police Station
TAT, New Bus Terminal, Phunphin Station, Airport & C
Samui Tour
ADV
THANON TALADMAI
Talat Kaset I
Phantip Travel
Mix's Net
Phangan Tour
RESTAURANTS & BARS
Ban Don B
Boogie Pub 3
Milano 1
Vegetarian Restaurant 2
THANON CHONKASEM
N
0 200 m
Talat Kaset II
THANON THA THONG
2
Don Sak & Nakhon
Thai Airways & 3

Samui Tour, 326/12 Thanon Taladmai (Ⓣ077 282352), handles buses to Ko Samui via the Raja vehicle ferries from Don Sak; Phangan Tour, also on Thanon Taladmai (Ⓣ077 205799), handles buses to Ko Pha Ngan via the Raja vehicle ferries from Don Sak; tickets for Songserm Express Boats to Samui, Pha Ngan and Tao (and from there to Chumphon) from the pier at Pak Nam Tapi, on the east side of Surat town itself, can be bought at ADV on Thanon Namuang (Ⓣ077 205419). The night boats to Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan and Ko Tao line up during the day at Ban Don Pier in the centre of Surat; as they're barely glorified cargo boats, it's worth going along there as early as you can, as the first to buy tickets get the more comfortable upstairs mattresses.

Arriving by **air**, you can take a B75 Phantip minibus for the 27-kilometre journey south from the airport into Surat Thani, or a combination ticket to Ko Samui (B280) or Ko Pha Ngan (B450); if you're flying out of Surat, you can catch the minibus from town to the airport at the Phantip Travel office in front of Talat Kaset I (see opposite). Budget (Ⓣ077 441166) have an outlet at the airport for **car rental**. Two of the **airlines** currently serving Surat airport have offices in town: Thai Airways at 3/27–28 Thanon Karoonrat, off Thanon Chonkasem (Ⓣ077 272610), and Orient Thai (One-Two-Go) on Thanon Taladmai opposite the *Wangtai Hotel* (Ⓣ077 222780–1); Air Asia can be contacted at their Bangkok call centre (Ⓣ02 515 9999).

If you're coming from points south by **air-conditioned minibus** or **share-taxi**, you should be deposited at the door of your destination. For **moving on** to the rest of the mainland, share-taxis and air-con minibuses tend to congregate around Talat Kaset II. Be aware, however, that there have been many reports of overcharging and **scams**, especially involving any kind of combination ticket, on the private, tourist-oriented minibus and bus services out of Surat, including those heading for Khao Sok National Park (see p.373) and Malaysia. Generally, as in most places in Thailand, you're better off making your own way to the public bus terminal, which, for most journeys from Surat, is bang in the centre of town. Certainly, avoid the unregistered travel agents at Talat Kaset II itself in favour of walking the short distance to the reliable Phantip Travel (see opposite); otherwise get in touch with TAT, who will recommend a registered travel agent.

TAT's office at the western end of town at 5 Thanon Taladmai (daily 8.30am–noon & 1–4.30pm; Ⓣ077 288817–9, Ⓦwww.tat.or.th/south5) covers Surat Thani, Chumphon and Ranong provinces; it currently has an adjacent branch of the **tourist police** (Ⓣ1155 or 077 200133), though this is scheduled to move in the near future. Small **share-songthaews** buzz around town, charging around B10–15 per person. You can access the **Internet** at Mix's Net on Thanon Chonkasem, just south of Thanon Taladmai.

Accommodation and eating

Most budget **accommodation** in Surat Thani is noisy, grotty and overpriced – you may consider yourself better off on a night boat to one of the islands. If you do get stuck here, head for the recently refurbished *Ban Don Hotel*, above a restaurant at 268/2 Thanon Namuang (Ⓣ077 272167; fan ❷, air-con ❸), where most of the very clean rooms with en-suite bathrooms and fans or air-con are set back from the noise of the main road. *In Town Hotel*, a couple of doors along at 276/1 Thanon Na Muang (Ⓣ077 210145–50, Ⓕ077 210422; ❸), is more expensive though not quite as well maintained as the *Ban Don*; there are TVs and en-suite bathrooms in both the fan and air-con rooms, and the latter have hot water. On the western side of the centre by the TAT office, *Wangtai Hotel*, 1 Thanon Taladmai (Ⓣ077 283020–39, Ⓔwangtai@loxinfo.co.th; ❺), is Surat Thani's best upmarket option, and surprisingly good value, with large, smart rooms around a swimming pool and several good restaurants.

For tasty, inexpensive Thai and Chinese **food** in large portions, head for the restaurant on the ground floor of the *Ban Don Hotel*. The night market between Thanon Si Chaiya and Thanon Ban Don displays an eye-catching range of dishes; a smaller offshoot by Ban Don pier offers less choice but is handy if you're taking a night boat. Also near the night-boat piers on Thanon Ban Don, *Milano* has an authentic oven turning out very tasty and reasonably priced pizza, and serves panini, home-made pasta and a few Italian fish and meat main courses. During the day, simple restaurants around Talat Kaset II bus station serve noodles, dim sum and Thai-style fast food, while one block east on Thanon Tha Thong, an unnamed vegetarian restaurant offers a wide selection of cheap and delicious tray food or fried noodles (look for the yellow flags outside and a sign saying "vegetarian food"; closes 4pm). If you're stranded in Surat for the night, your best bet for a **drink** is the *Boogie Pub*, a typical Wild West-style bar-restaurant with regular live music; it's a ten-minute walk from Thanon Taladmai down Thanon Chonkasem, then take the first road on the left and it's on your left.

Ko Samui

A wide cross-section of visitors, from globetrotting backpackers to suitcase-toting fortnighters, come to southern Thailand just for the beautiful beaches of **KO SAMUI**, 80km from Surat. At 15km across and down, Samui is generally large enough to cope with this diversity – except during the rush at Christmas and New Year – and the paradisal sands and clear blue seas have to a surprising extent kept their good looks, enhanced by a thick fringe of palm trees that gives a harvest of three million coconuts each month. However, development behind the beaches – which has brought the islanders far greater prosperity than the crop could ever provide – speeds along in a messy, haphazard fashion with little concern for the environment. At least there's a local bye-law limiting new construction to the height of a coconut palm (usually about three storeys), though this has not deterred either the luxury hotel groups or the real-estate developers who have recently been throwing up estates of second homes for Thais and foreigners.

For most visitors, the days are spent indulging in a few watersports or just lying on the beach waiting for the next drinks seller, hair-braider or masseur to come along; some even have the energy to make it to one of Samui's many **spas**, whether independent or attached to one of the posh hotels, for further pampering. Night-time entertainment is provided by a huge number of beach bars, tawdry bar-beers and several nightclubs on Chaweng and Lamai. For something more active, you should not miss the almost supernatural beauty of the **Ang Thong National Marine Park**, which comprises many of the eighty islands in the Samui archipelago (speedboat day-trips to Ko Tao are also available all over the island, but they cost a lot of money – around B1800 – for a matter of hours on the island). A day-trip by rented car or motorbike on the fifty-kilometre round-island road will throw up plenty more fine beaches – though it's hard to recommend a motorbike, as Samui has the highest rate of driving fatalities in Thailand, most of them involving bikes. Otherwise you could hook up with a **round-island tour**, such as those organized by Mr Ung's Magical Safari Tours (bookable through travel agents or your accommodation or contact ⓣ077 230114 or 081 895 5657, ⓦwww.ungsafari.com; from B1200), which will at least get you up the rough tracks of the mountainous interior to some spectacular viewpoints.

The island's most appealing beach, **Chaweng**, has seen the heaviest, most crowded development and is now the most expensive place to stay, though it does offer by far the best range of amenities and nightlife. Its slightly smaller neighbour, **Lamai**, lags a little behind in terms of looks and top-end development, but retains large pockets of backpacker bungalow resorts. The other favourite for backpackers is **Maenam**, which though less attractive again, is markedly quiet, with plenty of room to breathe between the beach and the round-island road. Adjacent **Bophut** is similar in appearance, but generally more sophisticated, with a cluster of boutique resorts, fine restaurants and a distinct Mediterranean feel in its congenial beachfront village. **Choeng Mon**, set apart in Samui's northeast corner, offers something different again: the small, part-sandy, part-rocky bay is tranquil and pretty, the seafront between the handful of upmarket hotels is comparatively undeveloped, and Chaweng's nightlife is within easy striking distance.

Accommodation on the island is generally in bungalow resorts, from the basic, through the comforts of the ever-growing mid-range, to the very swish: at the lower end of the scale, there are very few places left for under B350, but nearly all bottom-end bungalows now have en-suite bathrooms, constant electricity and fans; for the most upmarket places you can pay well over B4000 for the highest international standards. The price codes on the following pages are based on high-season rates, but out of season (roughly April–June, Oct & Nov) dramatic reductions are possible.

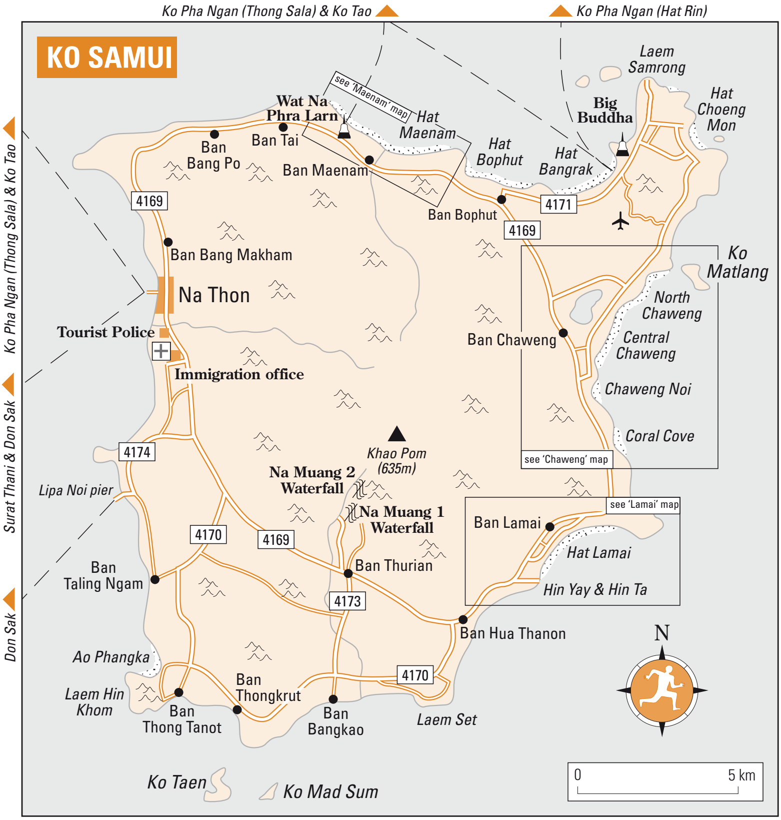
No particular **season** is best for coming to Ko Samui. The northeast monsoon blows heaviest in November, but can bring rain at any time between October and January, and sometimes causes high waves and strong currents, especially on the east coast. January is often breezy, March and April are very hot, and between May and October the southwest monsoon blows mildly onto Samui's west coast and causes some rain.

TAT runs a small but helpful office (daily 8.30am–noon & 1–4.30pm; Ⓣ077 420504 or 077 420720–2, Ⓔtatsamui@tat.or.th), tucked away on an unnamed side road in Na Thon (north of the pier and inland from the post office). Another useful source of **information** is Ⓦwww.samui.sawadee.com, a website set up by a German based at Lamai, which handles, among other things, direct bookings at a range of hotels on the island.

Ko Samui has around a dozen **scuba-diving** companies, offering trips for qualified divers and a wide variety of courses throughout the year, and there's a **recompression chamber** at Bangrak (Ⓣ081 084 8485, Ⓦwww.sssnetwork.com). Although the coral gardens at the north end of Ang Thong National Marine Park offer good diving between October and April, most trips for experienced divers head for the waters around Ko Tao (see p.330), which contain the best sites in the region; a day's outing costs around B3000, though if you can make your own way to Ko Tao, you'll save money and have more time in the water. The range of courses is comparable to what's on offer at Ko Tao, though prices are generally higher. Established and reliable PADI Five-Star Dive Centres include, each with several branches around the island, Samui International Diving School (Ⓦwww.planet-scuba.net), which has its head office at the *Malibu Resort* towards the north end of Central Chaweng (Ⓣ077 422386); and Easy Divers (Ⓦwww.easydivers-thailand.com), which has its head office next to *Sandsea Resort*, towards the north end of Lamai (Ⓣ077 231190).

Getting to the island

The most obvious way of getting to Ko Samui is on a **boat** from the **Surat Thani** area; for contact details of transport companies in Surat, see p.294. Services may fluctuate according to demand, but the longest-established ferry is the night boat


KO SAMUI
Ko Pha Ngan (Thong Sala) & Ko Tao
Ko Pha Ngan (Hat Rin)
Ko Pha Ngan (Thong Sala) & Ko Tao
Surat Thani & Don Sak
Don Sak
Laem Samrong
Hat Choeng Mon
Big Buddha
see 'Maenam' map
Wat Na Phra Larn
Hat Maenam
Ban Tai
Ban Bang Po
Ban Maenam
Hat Bophut
Hat Bangrak
Ban Bophut
4169
4171
4169
Ban Bang Makham
Na Thon
Tourist Police
Immigration office
Ko Matlang
North Chaweng
Central Chaweng
Ban Chaweng
Chaweng Noi
Coral Cove
see 'Chaweng' map
4174
Lipa Noi pier
Khao Pom (635m)
Na Muang 2 Waterfall
Na Muang 1 Waterfall
Ban Lamai
see 'Lamai' map
Hat Lamai
Hin Yay & Hin Ta
4170
4169
Ban Thurian
Ban Taling Ngam
4173
Ban Hua Thanon
N
Ao Phangka
4170
Laem Hin Khom
Ban Thong Tanot
Ban Thongkrut
Ban Bangkao
Laem Set
Ko Taen
Ko Mad Sum
0
5 km

that leaves **Ban Don** pier in Surat Thani itself for **Na Thon** – the main port on Samui – at 11pm every night (6hr); tickets (B150) are sold at the pier on the day of departure. From **Pak Nam Tapi** pier, on the east side of Surat town, one so-called Express Boat a day, handled by Songserm Travel (on Ko Samui Ⓣ077 420157), runs to Na Thon (2hr 30min; B180 including transport from Surat or Phunphin train station to the pier).

From **Don Sak**, 68km east of Surat, Seatran vehicle ferries run every hour to the new pier at Na Thon (1hr 30min; B180 including bus from Surat or Phunphin; on Ko Samui Ⓣ077 426000–2). Raja vehicle ferries run hourly between Don Sak and **Lipa Noi**, 8km south of Na Thon (1hr 30min; on Samui Ⓣ077 415230–3); every two hours to coincide with alternate boats, Samui Tour (on Samui Ⓣ077 421092) runs buses from Surat or Phunphin via the ferry to Na Thon, costing B180. Note that the total journey time (from Surat Thani) using the vehicle ferries from Don Sak is much the same as on the Songserm Express Boat from Pak Nam Tapi.

From Bangkok, the State Railway does train/bus/boat packages through to Ko Samui that cost a little less than if you organized the parts independently – about B680 if you travel in a second-class bunk. Overnight bus and boat packages from the government-run Southern Terminal cost from B600 on a basic air-con bus to B900 on a VIP bus, and are far preferable to the cheap deals offered by private companies on Thanon Khao San, as the vehicles used on these latter services are often substandard and many thefts have been reported.

At the top of the range, you can get to Ko Samui direct **by air** on Bangkok Airways (in Bangkok ☎02 265 5555; at Samui airport ☎077 245600, Ⓦwww.bangkokair.com), who operate around twenty flights a day from Bangkok, as well as daily flights from Phuket and Pattaya. Bangkok Airways also run six flights a week from Singapore, four a week from Hong Kong, while Berjaya Airlines (at Samui airport ☎084 053 2353) operates a twice-weekly service from Kuala Lumpur. Air-con minibuses meet incoming flights (and connect with departures) at the **airport** in the northeastern tip of the island, charging B100 to Chaweng for example. As well as bar and restaurant facilities, the quaint, rustic terminal has a reservations desk handling most of the island's moderate and expensive hotels, sometimes with very good discounts on rack rates. There are also currency-exchange facilities and an ATM, a bookshop, a post office with international telephones (daily 8am–8pm) and Budget car rental (☎077 427188).

For information about boats from Ko Samui to **Ko Pha Ngan** see p.319, and to **Ko Tao** see p.333; all offer the same service in the return direction.

Island transport

Songthaews, which congregate at the car park between the two piers in Na Thon, cover a variety of set routes during the daytime, either heading off clockwise or anti-clockwise on Route 4169, to serve all the beaches; destinations are marked in English and fares for most journeys range from B30 to B60. In the evening, they tend to operate more like taxis and you'll have to negotiate a fare to get them to take you exactly where you want to go. Ko Samui now also sports dozens of **air-con taxis**. By law, they're required to use their meters (on top of which they're allowed to add a B50 service charge), but you'll have a hard job persuading any driver to do so; you might be lucky enough to settle on a flat fare of B300 from Maenam to Chaweng, for example, after some hard bargaining. You'll also see some **motorbike taxis** buzzing about the island, which charge from B30 for a local drop, up to B150 from Na Thon to Chaweng. You can **rent a motorbike** from B150 in Na Thon and on the main beaches. Dozens are killed on Samui's roads each year, so proceed with great caution, and wear a helmet – apart from any other considerations, you can be landed with an on-the-spot B500 fine by police for not wearing one.

Na Thon

The island capital, **NA THON**, at the top of the long western coast, is a frenetic half-built town which most travellers use only as a service station before hitting the sand: although most of the main beaches now have post offices, currency-exchange facilities, ATMs, supermarkets, travel agents and clinics, the biggest and best concentration of amenities is to be found here. The town's layout is simple: the two piers come to land at the promenade, Thanon Chonvithi, which is paralleled first by narrow Thanon Ang Thong, then by Thanon Taweeratpakdee, aka Route 4169, the round-island road; the main cross-street is Thanon Na Amphoe, by the more northerly of the piers.

Accommodation and eating

If you really need a **place to stay** in Na Thon, your best bets are the *Nathon Residence* (☎077 236058; ④), on Thanon Taweeratpakdee next to Siam City Bank and near the market, a well-run place with a café downstairs and large, plain but spotless tiled rooms with air-con, cable TV and en-suite bathrooms, some with hot water, upstairs; and *Jinta Hotel* towards the south end of Thanon Chonvithi (Ⓣ077 420630, Ⓦwww.tapee.com; fan ③, air-con ④), with smart, bright, en-suite ground-floor rooms in a pleasant garden (some with air-con and hot water, all with cable TV) and its own **Internet café**.

Several stalls and small cafés purvey inexpensive Thai **food** around the market on Thanon Taweeratpakdee and on Thanon Chonvithi (including a lively night market by the piers), and there are plenty of Western-oriented places clustered around the piers. Justifiably popular, especially for breakfast, is cheerful and inexpensive *RT (Roung Thong) Bakery*, with one branch opposite the piers and another on Thanon Taweeratpakdee, which serves sandwiches, pancakes and pizzas, as well as Thai food and a wide variety of coffees. For lunch, head for the modern block of shops behind the large Samui Mart department store towards the south end of

Ang Thong National Marine Park

Even if you don't get your buns off the beach for the rest of your stay, it's worth taking at least a day out to visit the beautiful **Ang Thong National Marine Park**, a lush, dense group of 42 small islands strewn like dragon's teeth over the deep-blue Gulf of Thailand, 31km west of Samui. Once a haven for pirate junks, then a Royal Thai Navy training base, the islands and their coral reefs, white-sand beaches and virgin rainforest are now preserved under the aegis of the National Parks Department. Erosion of the soft limestone has dug caves and chiselled out fantastic shapes that are variously said to resemble seals, a rhinoceros, a Buddha image and even the temple complex at Angkor.

The surrounding waters are home to dolphins, wary of humans because local fishermen catch them for their meat, and *pla thu* (short-bodied mackerel), part of the national staple diet, which gather in huge numbers between February and April to spawn around the islands. On land, long-tailed macaques, leopard cats, common wild pig, sea otters, squirrels, monitor lizards and pythons are found, as well as dusky langurs, which, because they have no natural enemies here, are unusually friendly and easy to spot. Around forty bird species have had confirmed sightings, including the white-rumped shama, noted for its singing, the brahminy kite, black baza, little heron, Eurasian woodcock, several species of pigeon, kingfisher and wagtail, as well as common and hill mynah; island caves shelter swiftlets, whose homes are stolen for bird's nest soup (see box on p.460).

The largest land mass in the group is **Ko Wua Talab** (Sleeping Cow Island), where the park headquarters shelter in a hollow behind the small beach. From there it's a steep 430-metre climb (about 1hr return; bring walking sandals or shoes) to the island's peak to gawp at the panorama, which is especially fine at sunrise and sunset: in the distance, Ko Samui, Ko Pha Ngan and the mainland; nearer at hand, the jagged edges of the surrounding archipelago; and below the peak, a secret cove on the western side and an almost sheer drop to the clear blue sea to the east. Another climb from the beach at headquarters, only 200m but even harder going (allow 40min return), leads to Tham Buabok, a cave set high in the cliff-face. Some of the stalactites and stalagmites are said to resemble lotuses, hence the cave's appellation, "Waving Lotus". If you're visiting in September, look out for the white, violet-dotted petals of **lady's slipper orchids**, which grow on the rocks and cliffs.

The feature that gives the park the name Ang Thong, meaning "Golden Bowl", and that was the inspiration for the setting of cult bestselling novel, *The Beach*, is a landlocked saltwater lake, 250m in diameter, on **Ko Mae Ko** to the north of Ko Wua Talab. A well-made path (allow 30min return) leads from the beach through natural rock tunnels to the rim of the cliff wall that encircles the lake, affording another stunning view of the archipelago and the shallow, blue-green water far below, which is connected to the sea by a natural underground tunnel.

Thanon Taweeratpakdee: here you can choose between *Vegetarian Food*, a neat and simple veggie restaurant (closed Sun), and *Hia Meng (Starfish)*, a popular, well-run café serving duck or pork on rice.

Listings

Bookshop Nathon Book Store, on Thanon Na Amphoe, is a good second-hand place.

Hospital The state hospital (ⓣ077 421230–2) is 3km south of town off Route 4169.

Immigration office 2km south of town down Route 4169 (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm; ⓣ077 421069).

Massage The Garden Home Health Center, 2km north along Route 4169 in Ban Bang Makham (ⓣ077 421311), dispenses some of the best traditional Thai massages (B350/hr) on the island, though note that it closes at 5pm.

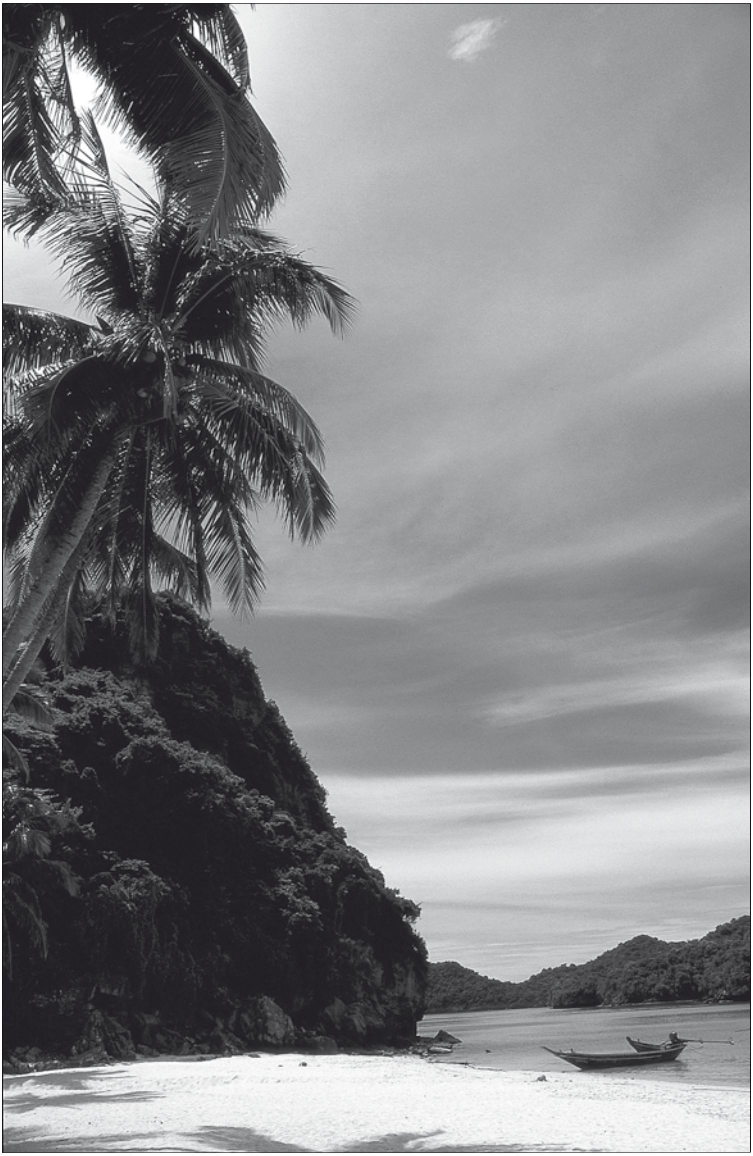
Post office At the northern end of the promenade (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm, Sat & Sun 9am–noon).

Practicalities

There are no scheduled boats to **Ang Thong**, only organized day-trips, which can be easily booked through your accommodation or a travel agent. The main operator is Highway Travel and Highsea Tour, Thanon Taweeratpakdee (north of Thanon Na Amphoe; ⓣ077 421290, ⓦwww.highseatour.com) whose boats leave Na Thon every day at 8.30am, returning at around 5pm. In between, there's a two-hour stop to explore Ko Wua Talab (just enough time to visit the viewpoint, the cave and have a quick swim, so don't dally), lunch, some cruising through the archipelago, a visit to the viewpoint over the lake on Ko Mae Ko and a snorkelling stop. Tickets cost B1150 per person, including pick-up from your accommodation and the B200 national park fee. Similar trips run from Ban Bophut on Ko Samui (organized by Air Sea Tour, ⓣ077 422262–3) and less frequently from Ko Pha Ngan and Ko Tao; *Seaflower*, at Ao Chaophao on Ko Pha Ngan's west coast, does three-day "treks" (see p.328). Several companies in Maenam and Bophut on Samui do pricey speedboat day-trips to Ang Thong, and the luxury yacht *Seatran Discovery* does the trip twice a week for B2800, including hotel pick-up, national park fee and kayaking (ⓣ077 426000–2, ⓦwww.seatrandiscovery.com).

If you want to make the most of the park's beautiful scenery of strange rock formations and hidden caves, take a dedicated **kayaking** trip with Blue Stars, based at Gallery Lafayette near the *Green Mango* nightclub on Chaweng (ⓣ077 413231, ⓦwww.bluestars.info). For a one-day trip, taking in the lake at Ko Mae Ko and kayaking and snorkelling among the islands in the northern part of the park, they charge B2000, including pick-up from your accommodation and boat over to the park, buffet lunch, snorkelling gear and national-park entrance fee. A two-day trip, which also comprises camping on a beach at Ko Sam Sao and kayaking to Ko Wua Talab, costs B4750.

If you want to stay at **Ko Wua Talab**, the National Parks Department maintains simple two- to eight-berth bungalows (B500–1500) at the headquarters. To book accommodation, contact the Ang Thong National Marine Park Headquarters (ⓣ077 280222 or 077 286025), or the Forestry Department in Bangkok (see p.49). Camping is also possible in certain specified areas: if you bring your own tent, the charge is B30 per person per night, or two-person tents can be rented for around B100 a night. If you do want to stay, you can go over on a boat-trip ticket – it's valid for a return on a later day. For getting around the archipelago from Ko Wua Talab, it's possible to charter a motorboat from the fishermen who live in the park; the best snorkelling is off Ko Thai Plao. At the daytime canteen at park headquarters, you can pre-order dinner for the evening.



△ Ang Thong National Marine Park

Poste-restante and packing services downstairs, international telephone service upstairs, including Catnet Internet access.

Tourist police 1km south of the town centre on Route 4169 ⓣ1155, 077 421281 or 077 421360.

Travel agent The reliable Phantip is on Thanon Taweeratpakdee (north of Thanon Na Amphoe; ⓣ077 421221–2). Services include through buses all the way to Bangkok, Krabi, Phuket and Hat Yai from Na Thon.

Maenam

The most westerly of the bays on the north coast is **MAENAM**, 13km from Na Thon and Samui's most popular destination for shoestring travellers. The exposed four-kilometre bay is not the island's prettiest, being more of a broad dent in the coastline, and the sloping, white-sand beach is relatively narrow and slightly coarse by Samui's high standards. But Maenam features the cheapest bungalows on the island, unspoilt views of fishing boats and Ko Pha Ngan, and good swimming. Despite the recent opening of some upmarket developments on the shoreline and a golf course in the hills behind, this is still the quietest and most laid-back of the major beaches, with little in the way of nightlife – though if you want to go on the razzle, there are late-night songthaews to and from Chaweng and Lamai. Though now heavily developed with multistorey concrete shophouses, the main road is set back far from the sea, connected to the beachside bungalows by an intricate maze of minor roads through the trees. At the midpoint of the bay, **Ban Maenam** is centred on a low-key road down to the fishing pier, which is flanked by several Internet shops and small boutiques.

Practicalities

Most visitors to Maenam **eat** in their hotel or resort restaurant, though a couple of unaffiliated places stand out. At the west end of the bay, signposted on a lane that runs east from Wat Na Phra Larn, *Sunshine Gourmet* is worth hunting down for its warm welcome and keen prices; it does a bit of everything, from cappuccino and home-made yoghurt for all-day breakfast, through own-baked pies, sandwiches and cakes, to international, especially German, main courses, seafood and other Thai dishes. *Angela's Bakery*, opposite the police station on the main through road to the east of the pier, is a popular, daytime-only expat hangout, offering great breakfasts and a wide choice of sandwiches, salads, soups and Western main courses, as well as cakes, pies and home-made chocolates.

If you need a **travel agent** on Maenam, head for the reliable Nice Tour and Travel, on the main road 200m east of the police station (ⓣ077 247198).

Accommodation

As well as one or two luxury resorts, Maenam has around thirty inexpensive and moderately priced bungalow complexes, most offering a spread of accommodation; the cheapest of these are at the far eastern end of the bay.

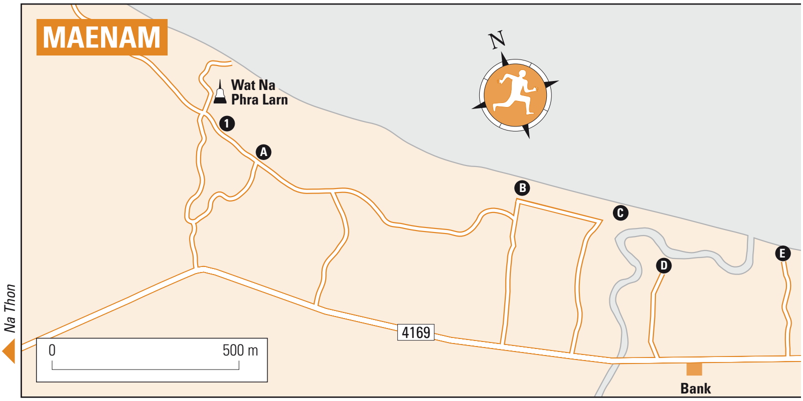
Cleopatra Palace At the eastern end of the bay, 1km from the village ⓣ077 425486, ⓦwww.cleopatra.freehomepage.com. In an unshaded, sandy but flower-strewn compound, this quiet, friendly place has a variety of clean, en-suite concrete bungalows, some with air-con and hot water. The Thai and Western food is recommended. Fan ③, air-con ⑤

Friendly About 500m east of *Cleopatra's Palace* ⓣ077 245736–7. Easy-going, fairly spacious place with helpful staff. All the bungalows are very clean and have their own bathrooms, though the place feels a little exposed, with few trees to provide shade. Internet access. ②

Harry's At the far western end, near Wat Na Phra Larn ⓣ077 425447, ⓦwww.harrys-samui.com. Set back about 150m from the beach amidst a secluded and shady tropical garden complete with a decent-sized swimming pool and waterfall, this popular, well-run place offers clean, spacious en-suite bungalows, with air-con, fridge and cable TV, as well as a small spa and Internet access. ⑥

Lolita On the east side of *Santiburi Resort* ⓣ077 425134, ⓔlolitakohsamui@yahoo.com. Quiet, efficiently run resort in a colourful, grassy garden on a long stretch of beach. Large, wooden, fan-cooled bungalows, some with hot water, and much smarter air-con rooms cluster around a kitsch, circular bar-restaurant adorned with pink Corinthian columns. Fan ④, air-con ⑦

Maenam Beach Huts At the eastern end of the bay ⓣ07 273 0226. Mellow, easy-going place offering old-style, thatched, rattan bungalows, with fans, en-suite bathrooms and mosquito screens, under the coconut palms on an extensive, sandy plot. There's also a massage sala and a popular



beachside restaurant with a pool table. ②

Maenam Resort 500m west of the village, just beyond *Santiburi Resort* Ⓣ077 247286–7, Ⓦwww.maenamresort.com. A welcoming, tranquil resort (no TVs) in tidy, shady grounds, with an especially long stretch of beach. The rooms and large bungalows, with verandas, hot water and fans or air-con, offer good-value comfort. ⑥

Moonhut On the east side of the village Ⓣ077 425247, Ⓦwww.kohsamui.com/moonhut. Welcoming farang-run place on a large, sandy plot, with a busy restaurant and beach bar and colourful, substantial and very clean bungalows; all have verandas, mosquito screens, wall fans and en-suite bathrooms, some have hot water and air-con. Fan ③, air-con ⑥

Morning Glory Next door to *Friendly* at the eastern end of the bay (no phone). Laid-back, farang-run old-timer that has resisted the urge to upgrade: in a shady compound, basic thatched-roofed wooden huts, either en suite or sharing, with mosquito nets and fans. All-you-can-eat seafood buffets in the evenings (B250) and live rock bands two nights a week. ①–②

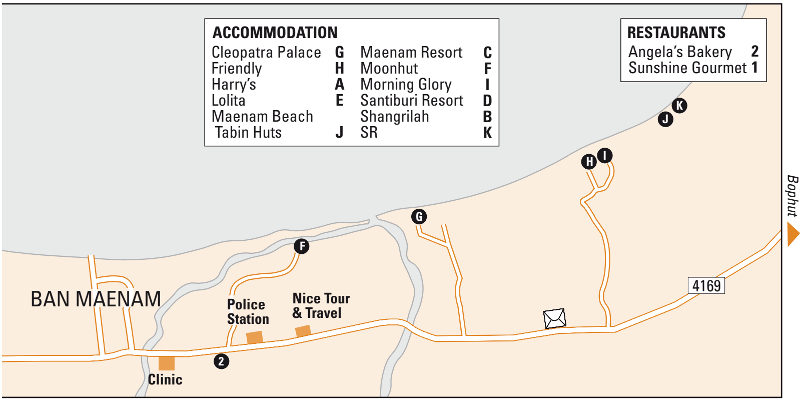
Santiburi Resort 500m west of the village Ⓣ077 425031–8, Ⓦwww.santiburi.com. Luxury hotel in beautifully landscaped grounds spread around a huge freshwater swimming pool and stream. Accommodation is mostly in Thai-style villas, inspired by Rama IV's summer palace at Phetchaburi, each with a large bathroom and separate sitting area, furnished in luxurious traditional design; some also have a private outdoor Jacuzzi. Facilities include watersports on the private stretch of beach, tennis courts, squash court and golf course, a spa, car rental, and an excellent "royal" cuisine restaurant, the *Sala Thai*. ⑨

Shangrilah West of *Maenam Resort*, served by the same access road Ⓣ077 425189, Ⓦwww.geocities.com/pk_shangrilah. In a flower-strewn compound that sprawls onto the nicest, widest stretch of sand along Maenam, these smart, well-maintained though tightly packed en-suite bungalows come with verandas, ceiling fans, decent furniture and mosquito screens. The restaurant serves good Thai food. ④

SR At the far eastern end of the bay Ⓣ077 427530, Ⓔsr_bungalow@hotmail.com. A quiet, welcoming, good-value place, set in a flower garden, with a very good restaurant. Accommodation is in large, smart, concrete bungalows with bathrooms, verandas and chairs, those on the beachfront having air-con. Fan ③, air-con ⑥

Bophut

The next bay east is **BOPHUT**, which has a similar look to Maenam but shows a marked difference in atmosphere and facilities, with a noticeable French influence. The quiet, two-kilometre beach attracts a mix of young and old travellers, as well as families, and **Ban Bophut**, now tagged "Fisherman's Village", at the east end of the bay, is well geared to meet their needs, with a sprinkling of small, comfortable


ACCOMMODATION
Cleopatra Palace G
Friendly H
Harry's A
Lolita E
Maenam Beach
Tabin Huts J
Maenam Resort C
Moonhut F
Morning Glory I
Santiburi Resort D
Shangrilah B
SR K
RESTAURANTS
Angela's Bakery 2
Sunshine Gourmet 1
BAN MAENAM
Police Station
Nice Tour & Travel
Clinic
4169
Bophut

hotels, and a bank currency-exchange booth, ATMs, scuba-diving outlets, a small second-hand bookstore, travel agents, Internet cafés and supermarkets. While through traffic sticks to Route 4169 to Chaweng and Route 4171 towards the airport, development of the village has been reasonably sensitive, preserving many of its old wooden shophouses on the two narrow, largely car-free streets that meet at a T-junction by the pier. At night, in sharp contrast to Chaweng's frenetic beach road, it's a fine place for a promenade, with a concentration of good upmarket restaurants and low-key farang-run bars. The nicest part of the beach itself is at the west end of the bay, between *Peace* and *Zazen* resorts, but again the sand is slightly coarse by Samui's standards.

Practicalities

Watersports are amply catered for, with jet-skis available just to the west of the village, and a little further along, next to *Anantara*, kayaks, water-skiing and windsurfing at The Dive Academy. Samui Go-kart, a **go-karting** track (daily 9am–9pm; Ⓣ077 425097; from B500 for 10min) on the main road 1km west of the village, offers everyone the chance to let off steam without becoming another accident statistic on the roads of Samui. South of Bophut, signposted off the west side of Route 4169, Ride on Ranch charges B1000 for an hour's **horse riding**. On the main road opposite its parent resort (see below), Peace Tropical Spa (Ⓣ077 430199, Ⓦwww.peace-tropical-spa.com) offers half a dozen types of **massage**, as well as body scrubs and wraps and facial treatments, at prices noticeably lower than the luxury hotel spas.

Accommodation

There's very little inexpensive accommodation left among Bophut's twenty or so resorts. Most establishments are well spaced out along the length of the beach, though a handful of boutique hotels cluster together in Ban Bophut.

Anantara west of the village on the main road Ⓣ077 428300–9, Ⓦwww.anantara.com. Luxury hotel in the style of an opulent Oriental palace, with blocks of balconied rooms arrayed round lush gardens, ponds, an attractive swimming pool and a central bar and restaurant. Thoughtful touches in the rooms include cafetieres and a choice of bath salts, and service is attentive. There's also a very attractive spa and a wide range of activities, from yoga to watersports. ⑨

Cactus Towards the west end of the beach between *Peace* and *Samui Palm Beach Resort*

Ⓣ077 245565, Ⓔcactusbung@hotmail.com. Welcoming place where ochre cottages with attractive bed platforms, small verandas and well-equipped bathrooms stand in two leafy rows running down to the beachside bar-restaurant; the cheapest have fans and cold water, the most expensive hot water, air-con and TV. Pool table, Internet access. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑥

Eden West of the village T-junction Ⓣ077 427645, Ⓦwww.edenbungalows.com. Congenial, French-run place with very well-appointed and maintained rooms and bungalows, all sporting air-con, hot water and cable TV. It's not on the beach, but in a garden setting around a pretty little pool. ⑥

Juzz'a Pizza 2 East of the village T-junction Ⓣ077 245662–3, Ⓦwww.juzzapizza.com. Above the recommended restaurant (see below), four small but smart rooms, well equipped with comfy beds, air-con, hot showers, fridges and cable TV. Two rooms look onto the road, while the other two have beachside terraces with great views. ⑥–⑦

The Lodge Towards the western end of the village Ⓣ077 425337, Ⓦwww.lodgesamui.com. Apartment-style block with immaculately clean and tastefully decorated modern rooms, all with balconies looking over the water, and boasting air-con, ceiling fan, mini-bar, satellite TV, plus spacious bathrooms with tubs to soak in. There's a seafront bar downstairs where you can get breakfast. ⑦

Peace At the mid-point of the beach Ⓣ077 425357, Ⓦwww.peaceresort.com. This large, well-run, friendly concern has shady and attractive lawned grounds, and being well away from the main road, lives up to its name. Spotless, tasteful bungalows, all with air-con, mini-bars, hot water and verandas, are brightly decorated and thoughtfully equipped. There's a beautiful pool with Jacuzzi and children's pool, a children's playground, a spa, Internet access, and a beachside restaurant serving good Thai and European food. Breakfast included. ⑧

Samui Palm Beach Resort West of *Peace*, from which it's next door-but-two Ⓣ077 425494–5, Ⓦwww.samuipalmbeach.com. Expensive but with frequent large discounts, especially at the airport (it's owned by Bangkok Airways). Spacious cottages and hotel rooms with air-con, satellite TV and fridges are in a Mediterranean style with hints of southern Thai architecture, and there are two attractive swimming pools, a gym and a giant chessboard in the spacious grounds. ⑨

Smile House Across the road from *The Lodge*, at the western end of the village Ⓣ077 425361, Ⓦwww.smilehouse-samuinet.com. Despite a slightly institutional feel, *Smile* has a reliable set of chalets adorned with silk cushions and some other nice decorative touches, grouped around a decent-sized, clean swimming pool and Jacuzzi. Hot water, mini-bar, TV and air-con in each room, with breakfast buffet included. ⑦

The Waterfront East of the village T-junction Ⓣ077 427165, Ⓦwww.thewaterfrontbophut.com. English-run boutique hotel, sociable and family-friendly, with a small swimming pool in a grassy garden. All sixteen simply but tastefully decorated rooms and bungalows have air-con, hot water, mini-bars, safes, cable TV, DVD players and views of the sea. Free pick-ups, Internet access and babysitting; breakfast included in the price. ⑦

Zazen At the far west end of the beach Ⓣ077 425085, Ⓦwww.samuizazen.com. Stylish bungalows clustered round a cute pool and lotus pond, furnished with traditional Thai tables, wardrobes and cabinets, as well as satellite TV, DVD and music station, free Internet connection and mini-bar; many sport a tropical-style open-air bathroom with rockery and fountain. Other facilities include a spa, a recommended international restaurant, cooking classes, table-tennis, pool table and the like. Breakfast included. ⑧

Eating

A stroll through the village will turn up a wide choice of good restaurants for dinner, though at a couple of the smaller places recommended below you might be advised to book in advance. *Siam Classic*, on the pier road (Ⓣ077 430065 or 087 111 1646, Ⓦwww.samuiclassic.com), stages a well-regarded show of **classical dance-drama** every night at 9.30pm (plus a 7.30pm show Mon, Tues, Fri & Sun). With a four-course Thai meal, it costs B580 if booked in advance, B680 on the door, or you can just watch the late show for B250 (including one drink).

Happy Elephant West of the village T-junction. Good choice of mostly Thai food, including a few unusual dishes and reasonably priced seafood, and friendly service. There's an attractive beachside terrace and a contemporary-style annexe, *On the Beach*, next door.

Healthy and Fun Yoga Café East of the village T-junction. Tasty, healthy lunches such as sandwiches, pomelo and other salads, and Thai desserts, as well as a wide range of juices, teas and coffees. Mon–Sat 11.30am–4pm.

Juzz'a Pizza 2 East of the village T-junction

Ⓣ077 245662–3. Friendly, small, elegant restaurant with a beachside terrace, serving excellent, authentic pizzas, with vegetarian and seafood options and a wide choice of extra toppings, as well as pastas and Thai and Western main courses. Evenings only.

La Boulangerie (Samui French Bakery) East of the village T-junction. The real deal: delicious, inexpensive croissants, breads, quiches, pizzas and patisserie. Also offers simple, very reasonably priced French brasserie fare, such as chicken breast with mustard sauce, sandwiches and salads. Around behind the ovens is a small terrace on the beach with fine views.

The Shack Grill West of the village T-junction Ⓣ077 246041. Small, pricey spot, run by an ebullient New Yorker, and focused on the large, open grill at the front of the restaurant: here all manner of local seafood and imported meats, such as Australian beef and New Zealand lamb, are cooked to your liking. Delicious apple pie and decent house wine.

Bangrak

Beyond the sharp headland with its sweep of coral reefs lies **BANGRAK**, sometimes called **Big Buddha Beach** after the colossus that gazes sternly down on the sun-worshippers from its island in the bay. The beach is no great shakes, especially during the northeast monsoon, when the sea retreats and leaves a slippery mud flat, but Bangrak still manages to attract the watersports crowd, and every Sunday it sees the family-friendly **Secret Garden Festival**, with barbecues, drink and live music from around 5 to 11pm.

The **Big Buddha** (*Phra Yai*) is certainly big and works hard at being a tourist attraction, but is no beauty. A short causeway at the eastern end of the bay leads across to a messy clump of souvenir shops and foodstalls in front of the temple, catering to day-tripping Thais as well as foreigners. Here you can at least get a decent cup of coffee or tea, or a sandwich at *Big Buddha Coffee*. Ceremonial dragon-steps then bring you up to the covered terrace around the Big Buddha, from where there's a fine view of the sweeping north coast. Look out for the B10 rice-dispensing machine, which allows you symbolically to give alms to the monks at any time of the day.

Bangrak's **bungalows** are squeezed together in a narrow, noisy strip between busy Route 4171 and the shore, underneath the airport flight path. By far the best of a disappointing bunch is *Shambala* (Ⓣ077 425330, Ⓦwww.samui-shambala.com; ④), an English-run place that's well spread out in a lush garden; the large, smart bungalows all have verandas, en-suite bathrooms and fans, and most have hot water; good Thai and Western food and massages are also on offer, as well as diving, sailing and other activities through in-house travel agent, One Hundred Degrees East (Ⓦwww.100degreeseast.com). Bangrak also supports one noteworthy **restaurant**, *The Mangrove*, a short way down the airport access road (Ⓣ077 427584; daily from 5.30pm; closed last three days of month), serving pricey but high-quality French-influenced food in a quiet, friendly and informal alternative to big hotel restaurants.

The northeastern cape

After Bangrak comes the high-kicking boot of Samui's **northeastern cape**, with its small, rocky coves overlooking Ko Pha Ngan and connected by sandy lanes. Songthaews run along Route 4171 to the largest and most beautiful bay, **Choeng Mon**. Its white sandy beach is lined with casuarina trees that provide shade for the bungalows and upmarket resorts, though on the whole it remains comparatively underdeveloped and laid-back.

Accommodation

Boat House Hotel Choeng Mon Ⓣ077 425041–52, Ⓦwww.imperialhotels.com. Run by the reliable Imperial group, *Boat House* is named after the two-storey rice barges that have been converted into suites in the grounds. It also offers luxury rooms in more prosaic modern buildings, often filled by package tours. Beyond the garden pool and the beachside boat-shaped pool, the full gamut of watersports is drawn up on the sands, plus there's a spa and a fitness room. ⑨

Island View Tucked in on the east side of Choeng Mon's *Boat House Hotel* Ⓣ077 245031, Ⓕ077 425583. Smart, good-value chalets with either fan and en-suite cold-water bathroom or air-con, hot water, TV and fridge, in a lively compound with a supermarket, a dive shop offering kayaks and snorkelling, a small bookshop and a beachfront bar. Fan ③, air-con ⑦

Ô Soleil West of the *Boat House Hotel* on Choeng Mon Ⓣ077 425232, Ⓔosoleil@loxinfo.co.th. A lovely, orderly, Belgian-run place in a pretty garden dotted with ponds. The good-value, pristine bungalows all have hot water, fridges and air-con and some have TVs. ⑤

Sila Evason Hideaway On Samui's northernmost headland, Laem Samrong Ⓣ077 245678, Ⓦwww.six-senses.com. Ultra-luxury resort, with an informal, congenial air, where chic villas with large, open-style bathrooms are secluded by bamboo fences and served by butlers; many also have their own private, infinity-edge swimming pool. There's an attractive main pool too, of course, with fine hilltop views, plus a seductive spa, a superb fusion restaurant, *Dining on the Rocks*, and access to the beach where watersports are available. ⑨

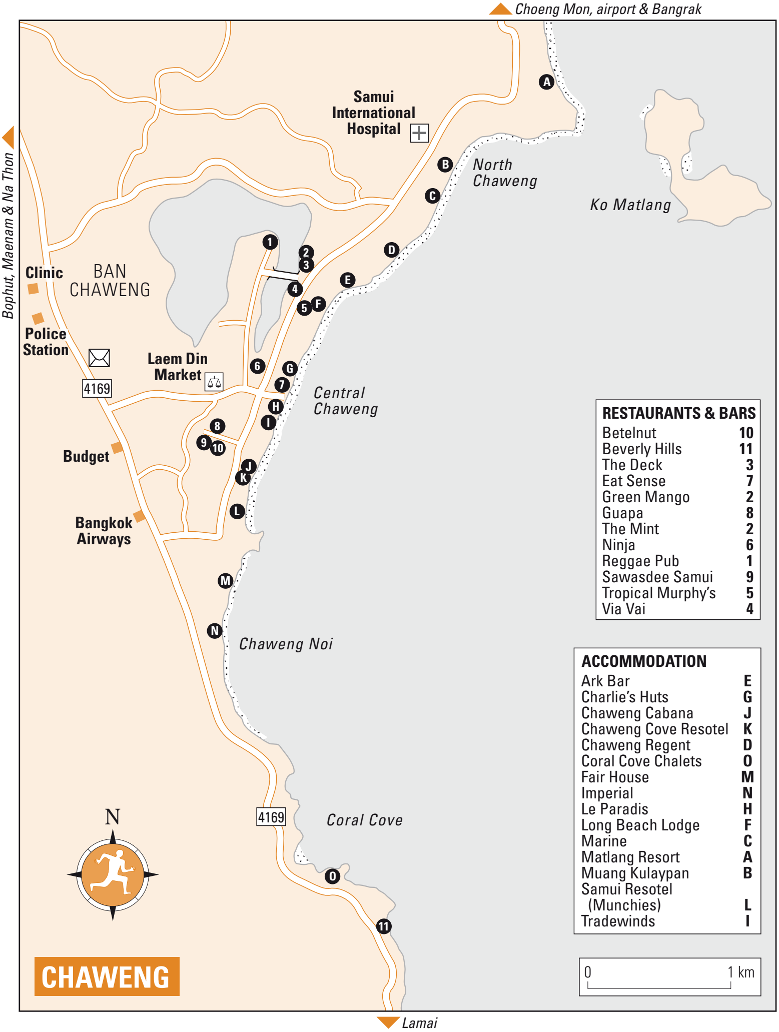
The Tongsai Bay Cottages and Hotel North side of Choeng Mon Ⓣ077 425015–28, Ⓦwww.tongsaibay.co.th. The island's finest hotel, an easy-going establishment with the unhurried air of a country club and excellent service. The luxurious hotel rooms, red-tiled cottages and palatial villas command beautiful views over the spacious, picturesque grounds, the private beach (with plenty of non-motorized watersports), a freshwater and a vast saltwater swimming pool and the whole bay. They all also sport second bathtubs on their secluded open-air terraces, so you don't miss out on the scenery while splashing about. There's an array of very fine restaurants and a delightful health spa, as well as a tennis court and gym. ⑨

Chaweng

For looks alone, none of the other beaches can match **CHAWENG**, with its broad, gently sloping strip of white sand sandwiched between the limpid blue sea and a line of palm trees. Such beauty has not escaped attention of course, which means, on the plus side, that Chaweng can provide just about anything the active beach bum demands, from thumping nightlife to ubiquitous and diverse watersports. The negative angle is that the new developments are ever more cramped and expensive, building work behind the palm trees and repairs to the over-commercialized main beach road are always in progress – and there's no certainty that it will look lovely when the bulldozers retreat.

The six-kilometre bay is framed between the small island of Ko Matlang at the north end and the 300-metre-high headland above Coral Cove in the south. From **Ko Matlang**, where the waters provide some decent snorkelling, an often exposed coral reef slices southwest across to the mainland, marking out a shallow lagoon and **North Chaweng**. This S-shaped part of the beach is comparatively peaceful, though it has some ugly pockets of development; at low tide it becomes a wide, inviting playground, and from October to January the reef shelters it from the worst of the northeast winds. South of the reef, the idyllic shoreline of **Central Chaweng** stretches for 2km in a dead-straight line, the ugly, traffic-clogged and seemingly endless strip of amenities on the parallel main drag largely concealed behind the treeline and the resorts. Around a low promontory is **Chaweng Noi**, a little curving beach in a rocky bay, which is comparatively quiet in its northern part, away from the road. Well inland of Central Chaweng, the round-island road, Route 4169, passes through the original village of **Ban Chaweng**.

South of Chaweng, the road climbs past **Coral Cove**, a tiny, isolated beach of coarse sand hemmed in by high rocks, with some good coral for snorkelling. It's well worth making the trip to the *Beverly Hills Café*, towards the tip of the head-


Choeng Mon, airport & Bangrak
Samui International Hospital
North Chaweng
Ko Matlang
Bophut, Maenam & Na Thon
Clinic
BAN CHAWENG
Police Station
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RESTAURANTS & BARS	
Betelnut	10
Beverly Hills	11
The Deck	3
Eat Sense	7
Green Mango	2
Guapa	8
The Mint	2
Ninja	6
Reggae Pub	1
Sawasdee Samui	9
Tropical Murphy's	5
Via Vai	4

ACCOMMODATION	
Ark Bar	E
Charlie's Huts	G
Chaweng Cabana	J
Chaweng Cove Resotel	K
Chaweng Regent	D
Coral Cove Chalets	O
Fair House	M
Imperial	N
Le Paradis	H
Long Beach Lodge	F
Marine	C
Matlang Resort	A
Muang Kulaypan	B
Samui Resotel (Munchies)	L
Tradewinds	I

land dividing Chaweng from Lamai, for a jaw-dropping view over Chaweng and Choeng Mon to the peaks of Ko Pha Ngan (and for some good, moderately priced food, notably seafood).

Accommodation

Over fifty **bungalow resorts** and **hotels** at Chaweng are squeezed into thin strips running back from the beachfront at right angles. In the ever-diminishing moderate range, prices are generally over the odds, while more and more expensive places are sprouting up all the time, offering sumptuous accommodation at top-whack prices.

Moderate

Charlie's Huts In the heart of Central Chaweng ⓣ077 422343, ⓕ077 414194. The cheapest accommodation options left on Central Chaweng are the thatched wooden huts in *Charlie's* grassy compound, but you'll have to get in quick – a luxury hotel is scheduled to move in some time in 2007. Fan ④, air-con ⑤

Long Beach Lodge Towards the north end of Central Chaweng ⓣ & ⓕ077 422372. An unusually spacious and shady sandy compound. All the orderly, clean bungalows and rooms are a decent size and have hot water, fridge, TV and air-con. Service is friendly, and breakfast is included in the price. ⑥

Marine North Chaweng ⓣ077 422416, ⓦwww.samuimarineresort.com. On a quieter part of North Chaweng, with a little bit of elbow room amidst the flowers, the large bungalows here are decent enough for the price; all have hot water, some have air-con and fridge. Internet access. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑥

Matlang Resort At the far north end of North Chaweng ⓣ077 230468–9, ⓔmatlang@loxinfo.co.th. Tranquil, friendly place facing a broad stretch of beach with nice views of Ko Matlang. The en-suite wooden bungalows, all with verandas and mosquito screens, some with air-con, are a little bit battered, but are spread around a very pleasant, shady flower garden. Fan ④, air-con ⑥

Samui Resotel (Munchies) At the south end of Central Chaweng ⓣ077 422374, ⓦwww.samuiresotel.com. Under the same ownership as *Chaweng Cove Resotel*, with a similar concept of no-frills luxury, but marginally cheaper and with a smaller pool. All rooms with hot water, air-con, mini-bar and TV: choose between hotel rooms at the back by the road, and squat chalets increasing in price towards the beach. ⑥

Expensive

Ark Bar (Garden-Beach Resort) North end of Central Chaweng ⓣ077 422047, ⓦwww.ark-bar.com. For party people who want to be near the heart of Chaweng's nightlife: decent, no-frills rooms with air-con, TV, fridge and hot water flank a long, narrow strip stuffed with flowers, which runs down to a popular beach bar and a small pool and Jacuzzi. ⑦

Chaweng Cabana South end of Central Chaweng ⓣ077 422377, ⓦwww.chawengcabana.com. Reliable, well-run option, popular with families, with a smallish swimming pool; tightly packed bungalows in a lush garden with bland but tasteful decor come with air-con, hot water, satellite TV and mini-bar. ⑧

Chaweng Cove Resotel South end of Central Chaweng ⓣ077 422509–10, ⓦwww.chaweng-cove.com. Welcoming, reliable place that offers all mod cons (air-con, hot water, mini-bar, TV), though little character, at reasonable prices. At the back towards the road the hotel rooms come with balconies, while towards the beach, there's a good-sized pool and tightly packed wooden bungalows with thatched roofs and verandas. Breakfast included. ⑦

Chaweng Regent At the bottom end of North Chaweng ⓣ077 422389–90, ⓦwww.chawengregent.com. Reliable, well-run place offering elegant bungalows and rooms with private terraces and all mod cons around lotus ponds, two pools, a fitness centre, sauna and spa. ⑨

Coral Cove Chalets Above Coral Cove ⓣ077 422260–1, ⓦwww.coralcovechalet.com. Good-value and stylish place with bright, tasteful bungalows and rooms, each with air-con, balcony, TV and mini-bar, grouped around an attractive pool and Jacuzzi. ⑦

Fair House North end of Chaweng Noi ⓣ077 422255–6, ⓦwww.fairhousesamui.com. A great location on a lovely stretch of beach, with extensive, lush gardens and two pools. The colourfully decorated bungalows are preferable to the large hotel rooms, which have good facilities but lack style. ⑧

Imperial Chaweng Noi ⓣ077 422020–36, ⓦwww.imperialhotels.com. The longest-established luxury hotel on Samui is a grand but lively establishment with a Mediterranean feel, set in sloping, landscaped gardens; features include two pools (one sea water, one fresh with a Jacuzzi), a spa, tennis court and all kinds of watersports. ⑨

Le Paradis Central Chaweng ⓣ077 239041–3, ⓦwww.leparadisresort.com. Set in lush, spacious gardens, twelve traditional Ayutthaya-style houses on stilts, decorated with traditional silk and cotton fabrics, blended stylishly with the Western-style bathrooms, mini-bars and air-con. Attractive beachside swimming pool and health spa. ⑨

Muang Kulaypan North Chaweng ⓣ077 230036, ⓦwww.kulaypan.com. Original, stylish boutique hotel arrayed around a large, immaculate garden with a black-tiled swimming pool and an excellent beachside restaurant (see below). Rooms – each with their own private balcony or garden – combine contemporary design with traditional Thai-style comforts. ⑧

Tradewinds Central Chaweng ⓣ077 414294, ⓦwww.tradewinds-samui.com. A cheerful, well-run place of characterful bungalows and rooms (all with air-con, hot water, mini-bar, cable TV and balcony) with plenty of room to breathe in colourful tropical gardens. The resort specializes in sailing, with its own catamarans (instruction available), as well as offering kayaks and croquet. ⑧

Eating

Chaweng offers all manner of foreign **cuisines**, from Italian to Korean, much of it of dubious quality. Amongst all this, it's quite hard to find good, reasonably priced Thai food – setting aside the places recommended below, it would be worth exploring the cheap and cheerful night-time food stalls at Laem Din market, which are popular with local workers, on the middle road between Central Chaweng and Highway 4169.

Betelnut Soi Colibri, a small lane at the south end of Central Chaweng opposite the landmark *Central Samui Beach Resort* ☎ 077 413370. By far Samui's best restaurant, serving exceptional Californian-Thai fusion food, with prices to match. Few tables, so reservations highly recommended.

Budsaba Restaurant At the *Muang Kulaypan Hotel* ☎ 077 230036. This charming, upmarket beachfront restaurant fully justifies the journey up to North Chaweng: you get to recline in your own seaside sala or open-sided hut on stilts while tucking into unusual and excellent Thai dishes such as banana-flower and shrimp salad. Live traditional music and dance Tues, Thurs, Sat & Sun evenings.

The Deck Central Chaweng, just north of the *Full Circle* club. Good, reasonably priced all-rounder where you're bound to find something to satisfy from the wide-roaming menu: Western and Thai main courses with good vegetarian and vegan options, hearty baguettes, very good espresso coffees, Thai desserts and all-day set breakfasts for B99.

Eat Sense Central Chaweng, next to *Charlie's Huts* ☎ 077 414242. Spacious, relaxing, mostly open-air restaurant on the beachfront, serving expensive but delicious Thai food – try the deep-fried prawns with cashew nuts and tamarind sauce.

Guapa Soi Colibri, Central Chaweng. Small, elegant "tropical tapas" bar under the same ownership as *Betelnut* opposite. Sangria and delicious Spanish and Asian tapas for around B120 each, such as beautifully presented paella and delicious Andalucian sausages fried with apples.

Ninja Near *Charlie's Huts* in Central Chaweng. Popular, well-run, very basic and cheap restaurant, serving simple Thai faves such as *tom yam*, *som tam* and *phat thai*, as well as crepes, breakfasts and other Western food. Open 24hr.

Sawasdee Samui Soi Colibri, next to *Betelnut*. Small, popular, welcoming restaurant, run by the former manager of the SITCA cooking school, serving, as you'd expect, delicious, attractively presented Thai food at around B120 a dish.

Via Vai Near *Swensen's*, Central Chaweng. Two Neapolitan brothers have built an authentic wood-fired brick oven here to produce great thin-crust pizzas such as Delicata with asparagus and blue cheese. The pasta menu includes several home-made varieties and sauces such as smoked salmon and mascarpone, and there are twenty varieties of home-made ice cream to look forward to as well.

Drinking and nightlife

Avoiding the raucous bar-beers and English theme pubs on the main through road, the best place to **drink** is on the beach: at night dozens of resorts and dedicated bars lay out small tables and candles on the sand, especially towards the north end of Central Chaweng and on North Chaweng. On Wednesdays, from 2pm until well into the evening, the *Ark Bar* (see opposite) hosts a popular beach party, with house and funk DJs and a free barbecue. One of the main drag's theme pubs is worth singling out: with draught Guinness and Kilkenny, big-screen sports, quiz nights, live music and decent food, Irish-run *Tropical Murphy's*, opposite *McDonald's* in Central Chaweng, has turned itself into a popular landmark and meeting place.

Bang in the middle of Central Chaweng but set well back from the beach across a small lake, *The Reggae Pub* is Chaweng's oldest **nightclub**, a venerable Samui institution with a memorabilia shop to prove it. It does time now as an unpretentious, good-time, party venue, with plenty of drinking games, but shows its roots with a rasta party on Wednesday and a dancehall party on Saturday. The area's other long-standing dance venue, *Green Mango* at the north end of Central Chaweng, occupies a similarly huge shed combining an industrial look with that of a tropical greenhouse. The alley leading up to it, Soi Green Mango, is now lined with vibrant bars and clubs, including Samui's current hippest venue, *The Mint*, which brings in the best local and international DJs.

Listings

Airline Bangkok Airways, south end of Ban Chaweng on Route 4169 ⓣ077 422512–9.

Bookshop Bookazine, next to *Tropical Murphy's* in Central Chaweng, sells English-language books, newspapers and magazines.

Cookery courses The highly recommended Samui Institute of Thai Culinary Arts (SITCA; ⓣ077 413172, ⓦwww.sitca.net), on Soi Colibri, a small lane at the south end of Central Chaweng opposite the landmark *Central Samui Beach Resort*, runs two-and-a-half-hour classes in the morning and afternoon (B1600), and you get to eat what you've cooked with a friend afterwards. They also run fruit- and vegetable-carving courses (2hr/day for 3 days; B3500), and have a culinary shop selling Thai cooking accessories, ingredients and cookbooks.

Hospital The private Samui International Hospital in North Chaweng (ⓣ077 230781, ⓦwww.sih.co.th) provides, among other things, 24-hour emergency services, house calls and a dental clinic.

Language courses Mind Your Language, on Route 4169 towards the south end of Ban Chaweng near Budget (ⓣ077 230314, ⓦwww.mindyourlanguage.net), offers Thai language courses from beginners to advanced, including five-day courses for tourists and private tutoring.

Laundry English-run Bubbles, Soi Colibri (ⓣ077 230715), is dependable.

Pharmacy Boots has a convenient branch in the middle of Central Chaweng, just up the road from *Tropical Murphy's* pub.

Police station Route 4169, Ban Chaweng. The tourist police (ⓣ1155) are planning to open a branch behind *McDonald's* in Central Chaweng.

Post office Route 4169, Ban Chaweng; poste-restante and packing service.

Spas Among stand-alone spas, which are generally cheaper than the luxury hotel versions, Living Senses, above *McDonald's* in the Living Square shopping plaza in Central Chaweng (ⓣ077 230917, ⓦwww.livingsensesspa.com), has a good reputation for its massages, reflexology, body wraps and scrubs; Four Seasons, a short way south on the opposite side of the main drag, next to Bookazine (ⓣ077 414141–3, ⓦwww.spafourseasons.com), offers a wider range of treatments and a little more style, at higher prices.

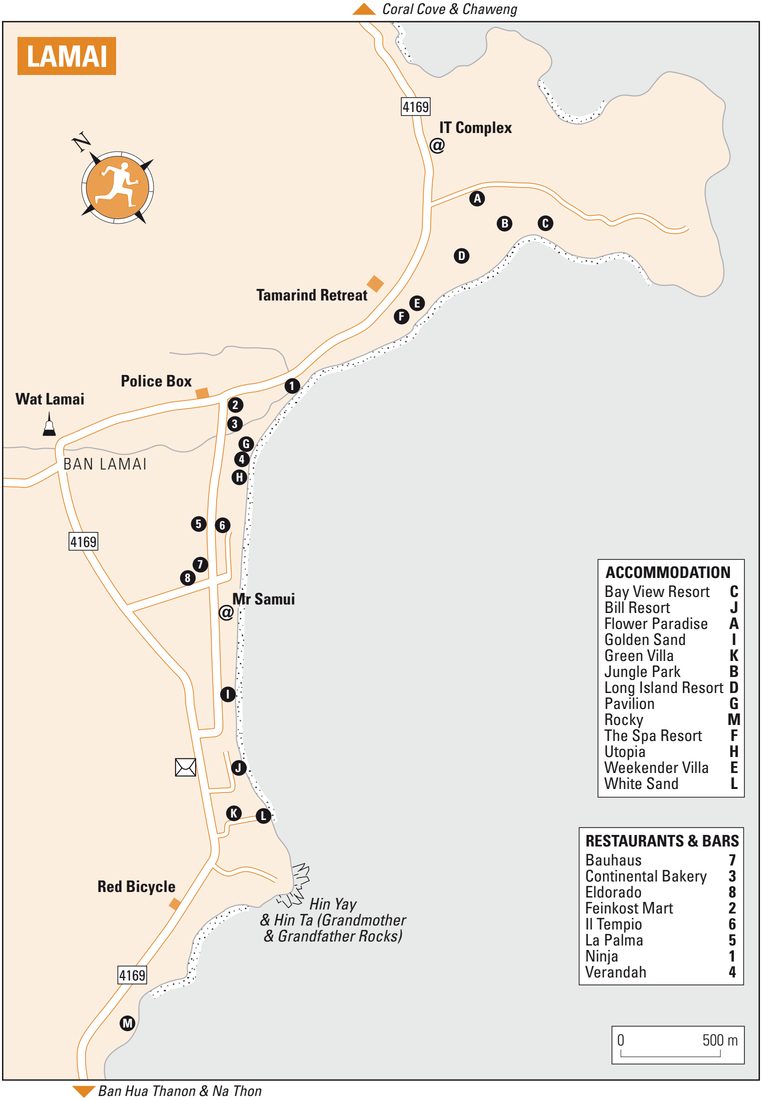
Travel agent English-run Travel Solutions, just off the main road opposite *Tropical Murphy's* (ⓣ077 239007, ⓦwww.travelsolutionsthailand.com), is a reliable and knowledgeable all-round agent, offering worldwide air-ticketing, Thai train and bus tickets and local services.

Vehicle rental Motorbikes (from B150/day) and four-wheel drives (from B800/day) can be rented from many locations along the main drag; if reliability is your main priority, contact Budget in Ban Chaweng (ⓣ077 413384, ⓦwww.budget.co.th; from B1300 a day).

Watersports Samui Ocean Sports, on the beach in front of the *Chaweng Regent* at the bottom end of North Chaweng (ⓣ081 940 1999, ⓦwww.sailing-in-samui.com), rents windsurfers (B450–550/hr) and kayaks (one-person B150/hr; two-person B200/hr), as well as offering sailing lessons, trips and charters.

Lamai

Samui's nightlife is most tawdry at **LAMAI** (though Chaweng is fast catching up): planeloads of European package tourists are kept happy here at dozens of open-air hostess bars, sinking buckets of booze while slumped in front of music videos. The action is concentrated into a farang toytown of bars and Western restaurants that has grown up behind the centre of the beach, interspersed with supermarkets, clinics, banks, ATMs, dive shops and travel agents. Running roughly north to south for 4km, the white palm-fringed beach itself is, fortunately, still a picture, and generally quieter than Chaweng, with far less in the way of watersports and a lighter concentration of development – it's quite easy to avoid the boozy mayhem by staying at the peaceful extremities of the bay, where the backpackers' resorts have a definite edge over Chaweng's. At the northern end, the spur of land that hooks eastward into the sea is perhaps the prettiest spot, though it's beginning to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ACCOMMODATION	
Bay View Resort	C
Bill Resort	J
Flower Paradise	A
Golden Sand	I
Green Villa	K
Jungle Park	B
Long Island Resort	D
Pavilion	G
Rocky	M
The Spa Resort	F
Utopia	H
Weekender Villa	E
White Sand	L

RESTAURANTS & BARS	
Bauhaus	7
Continental Bakery	3
Eldorado	8
Feinkost Mart	2
Il Tempio	6
La Palma	5
Ninja	1
Verandah	4

attract some upmarket development: it has more rocks than sand, but the shallow sea behind the coral reef is protected from the high seas of November, December and January.

The original village of **Ban Lamai**, set well back on Route 4169, remains surprisingly aloof, and its wat contains a small museum of ceramics, agricultural tools and other everyday objects. Most visitors get more of a buzz from **Hin Yay** (Grandmother Rock) and **Hin Ta** (Grandfather Rock), small rock formations on the bay's southern promontory which never fail to raise a giggle with their resemblance to the male and female sexual organs. On the main road, 300m south of the rocks, Red Bicycle (Ⓣ077 232136 or 087 278 8818, Ⓦwww.redbicycle.org) rents out **mountain bikes** (B350/day) and runs daily, four-hour **guided rides** (B1500), as well as a variety of longer trips.

Lamai boasts two of Samui's longer-standing and better **spas**. The oldest, *The Spa Resort* (Ⓣ077 230976, Ⓦwww.spasamui.com) covers everything from fasting programmes (US$300/week) to Thai massage (B300/hour) and herbal saunas (B300/hour). Also on offer are a wide range of other massages, body and facial wraps, and yoga, meditation, massage and cooking classes. *The Spa* now has two locations, the main one at the far north end of the beach next to *Weekender Villa*, the other, more upmarket branch 3km away in the hills above Lamai, each with a swimming pool and a wide variety of accommodation (④–⑧; minimum 4-night stay). With less of an emphasis on clean living, and more on pampering, Tamarind Retreat (Ⓣ077 230571 or 077 424436, Ⓦwww.tamarindretreat.com) is set in a beautiful, secluded coconut grove just north of *Spa Resort's* beachside branch off the main road. Here a session in their unique herbal steam room, set between two boulders by a waterfall-fed plunge pool, and a two-hour Thai massage, for example, costs B1900. Other massages, such as head, foot and face, are also available, activities include yoga and t'ai chi classes, and there are luxury villas on the site to rent.

Practicalities

Several places on the main beachside drag offer **rental motorbikes** (from B150/day) and **four-wheel drives** (from B800/day). A couple of **Internet cafés**, among dozens of options on Lamai, stand out. *Mr Samui's* art gallery and café, just south of the central crossroads, is a congenial choice offering good espresso coffee, or you could head for the unmissable, shiny IT Complex at the north end of the bay, which contains a smart Internet café.

Accommodation

Lamai's **accommodation** is generally less cramped and slightly better value than Chaweng's, though it presents far fewer choices at the top end of the market. The

△ Lamai, Ko Samui

far southern end of the bay towards the Grandparent Rocks has the tightest concentration of budget bungalows.

Bay View Resort On the bay's northern headland Ⓣ077 418429, Ⓦwww.bayviewsamui.com. Neat, stylish bungalows with verandas and en-suite hot-water bathrooms in an extensive, flower-bedecked compound; the poshest come with air-con, mini-bar and cable TV. Offers a friendly welcome and great sunset views of the beach from the attractive restaurant. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑥

Bill Resort At the far southern end of the bay Ⓣ077 424403, Ⓦwww.thebillresort.com. A friendly, efficient and orderly setup, crammed into a fragrant, overgrown garden with a decent-sized pool and Jacuzzi, on a pleasant stretch of beach and up the hill behind. Its clean, en-suite rooms and bungalows, most with air-con and hot water, offer very good value if you don't need much elbow room. Fan ④, air-con ⑤

Flower Paradise Northern end of the bay, on the headland above *Jungle Park* Ⓣ089 288 8326, Ⓦwww.samui.ch. Just a short walk from the beach, a friendly, well-run, German-Swiss place in a small, lush garden. All the clean, well-tended bungalows have hot water and there's a good restaurant. ③

Golden Sand Towards the southern end of the beach Ⓣ077 424031–2, Ⓦwww.goldensand-resort.com. Smart, well-equipped rooms and bungalows – air-con, TV, fridge and hot water, a few with bathtubs – on a broad, grassy plot studded with coconut palms, with a small, elegant pool. ⑦

Green Villa On the access road to *White Sand*, at the far southern end of the bay Ⓣ077 424296, Ⓔresagreenvilla@hotmail.com. Quiet, spacious, French-run operation set back from the beach among the palm trees, with a small swimming pool, clean, simple, en-suite bungalows with fans and grand, air-con villas with TVs, fridges and bathtubs. Fan ③, air-con ⑦

Jungle Park On the bay's northern headland Ⓣ077 418034–7, Ⓦwww.jungle-park.com. Next door to *Bay View Resort*. Lives up to its name with spacious grounds full of shady trees. Notable here are the large swimming pool and the attractive bar-restaurant sandwiched between it and the beach; there's also a small spa. All the reliable, well-maintained rooms and bungalows have air-con, mini-bar and hot water; buffet breakfast included. ⑦

Long Island Resort At the far north end of the beach Ⓣ077 424202 or 077 418456, Ⓦwww.longislandresort.com. Fashionable boutique resort with elegant but cosy bungalows (all with hot water, the cheapest with fans, the priciest with air-con, satellite TV, DVD players and mini-bars), an attractive pool, a small, rustic spa and a good Thai and Western bar-restaurant. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑦

Pavilion On the central stretch of Lamai, north of the crossroads Ⓣ077 424030, Ⓦwww.pavilionsamui.com. Lamai's best upmarket choice, just far enough from the pubs and clubs to get some peace; the atmosphere is friendly and lively, and there's a spa and a good beachside pool and restaurant. Most of the accommodation is in attractive, contemporary Thai-style rooms, but if your purse will stretch that far, go for one of the spa junior suites, each boasting a private courtyard with Jacuzzi and day bed. ⑨

Rocky Beyond the headland, at the far southern end of the bay Ⓣ077 418367, Ⓦwww.rockyresort.com. Recently upgraded to a boutique resort, though the service doesn't quite match the high prices. On a plot thick with vegetation that gives access to three beaches, elegant, Thai-style bungalows with air-con and hot water, an attractive swimming pool fed by an artificial waterfall, a good restaurant and an appealing beach bar with tables on the eponymous rocks. ⑧

Utopia On the central stretch of Lamai, north of the crossroads Ⓣ077 233113, Ⓔjim_utopia@hotmail.com. Well-run, welcoming place on a narrow strip of land teeming with flowers, good value and reasonably quiet considering its central location. The cheapest bungalows have mosquito screens, fans and en-suite bathrooms, while those at the top of the price range boast air-con, hot water, TV and fridge. Fan ④, air-con ⑦

Weekender Villa Between the main road and the beach to the east of Ban Lamai Ⓣ077 424116, Ⓦwww.weekender-villa.com. Despite its location, this very well-maintained, German-run establishment is quiet enough; the staff are friendly and the large, smart bungalows, equipped with en-suite hot showers and decorated with contemporary art, shelter under the coconut trees in a spacious compound. There's a small swimming pool, an air-con massage room and an attractive beachside bar-restaurant that sports a pool table and hosts bridge, chess and draughts nights. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑦

White Sand At the far southern end of the bay Ⓣ077 424298. Long-established and laid-back budget place in a large, shady, sandy compound, with around two dozen simple beachside huts, some en suite, which attract plenty of long-term travellers. ①–③

Eating and drinking

There are far fewer eating options on Lamai than on Chaweng to tempt you away from your guest-house kitchen. Besides the **restaurants** recommended below, you could try any one of several decent Italian places, such as *Il Tempio* and *La Palma*, a short way north of the tourist village's main crossroads. Lamai's **nightlife** is all within spitting distance of the central crossroads. Apart from the hostess bars, *Bauhaus* is the main draw, a barn-like entertainment complex with a bistro, pool tables, big screens showing satellite sport and a dance floor (foam parties Mondays and Fridays).

Continental Bakery North of the central crossroads, near Highway 4169. Friendly, Swiss-run place serving good breads, cakes, burgers, sandwiches and espressos, as well as all-day breakfasts ranging from French and American to Belgian (with pork steak, apparently).

Eldorado Just west of the central crossroads. Highly recommended, good-value Swedish restaurant, serving a few Thai favourites, salads, steaks and other international main courses, plus one or two indigenous specialities such as Swedish meatballs. All-you-can-eat barbecue Wed evening for B230.

Feinkost Mart next to *Continental Bakery*. Wide selection of Western, mostly German food, including plenty of sausages and good pizzas, with German beer to wash it all down and apple pie to finish you off.

Ninja On Highway 4169, east of Ban Lamai. A branch of Chaweng's backpacker hotspot, a dependable, simple, cheap café serving basic Thai favourites, as well as crepes and other Western food.

The Spa Resort At the far north end of the beach. Excellent, casual, moderately priced beachside restaurant, serving a huge range of mostly vegetarian Thai and Western (including Mexican) dishes, as well as raw food. The veggie "ginger nuts" stir-fry is excellent, omelettes and salads are specialities, but there are also plenty of meat and marine offerings. A long menu of juices, smoothies and shakes includes a delicious lime juice with honey.

Verandah At *Mui Bungalows*, a few hundred metres north of the central crossroads. Reliable, German-run place, which serves excellent, well-presented, moderately priced international and Thai food.

The south and west coasts

Lacking the long, attractive beaches of the more famous resorts, the **south and west coasts** rely on a few charming, isolated spots with peaceful accommodation, which can usually only be reached by renting a motorbike or four-wheel drive. Heading south from Lamai, you come first to the Muslim fishing village at **Ban Hua Thanon** and then, about a kilometre or so south and well signposted off Route 4170, the spacious gardens of *Samui Marina Cottage* (Ⓣ077 233394–6, Ⓦwww.samuimarina.com; ⑥), a well-run, welcoming place with a large swimming pool and air-con, hot water, satellite TV and mini-bar in all the bungalows. Off Route 4170 a kilometre or so further down the coast, Kiteboarding Asia (Ⓣ081 591 4592–4, Ⓦwww.kiteboardingasia.com), based at *Samui Orchid Resort*, offer instruction in **kiteboarding**, which is at its best here between December and February. Don't be tempted by the pitiful aquarium at the same resort, where the tanks are barely bigger than the fish.

A kilometre further on is one of the island's most secluded hotels: originally founded as a private club on a quiet south-facing promontory, the *Laem Set Inn* (Ⓣ077 424393, Ⓦwww.laemset.com; fan ⑥, air-con ⑨) offers a wide range of elegant rooms and suites – some of them reassembled village houses – as well as an excellent restaurant, cookery courses, a spa, plenty of watersports and a scenically positioned swimming pool. The access road to the *Laem Set Inn* takes you past the nearby **Samui Butterfly Garden** (daily 9am–5pm; B150, children B100), opposite *Central Samui Village*, where you can wander the hillside overlooking the sea surrounded by dozens of brilliantly coloured lepidopterans.

The gentle but unspectacular coast beyond is lined with a good reef for snorkelling, which can be explored most easily from the fishing village of **Ban Bangkao**. There's also good snorkelling around **Ko Taen**, a short way offshore to the south: an all-day tour from, for example, TK Tour (Ⓣ077 423117) in the next village to the west, **Ban Thongkrut**, including pick-up from your accommodation, snorkelling equipment and lunch on the neighbouring island of Ko Mad Sum, will set you back B700 per person.

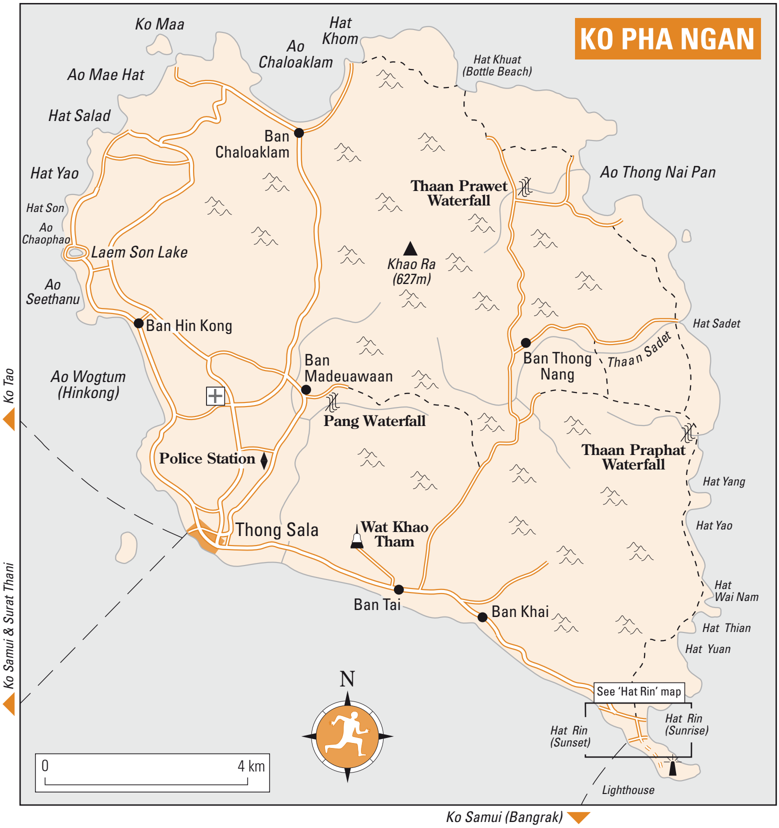
About 5km inland, near **Ban Thurian**, the **Na Muang Falls** make a popular outing as they're not far off the round-island road (each of the two main falls has its own signposted kilometre-long paved access road off Route 4169). The lower fall splashes and sprays down a twenty-metre wall of rock into a large pool, while Na Muang 2, upstream, is a more spectacular, shaded cascade that requires a bit of foot-slogging from the car park (about 15min uphill); alternatively you can walk up there from Na Muang 1, by taking the 1500-metre trail that begins 300m back along the access road from the lower fall. The self-styled "safari camp" at the Na Muang 1 entrance (Ⓣ077 424098, Ⓦwww.namuang-safaripark.com) offers thirty-minute **elephant-rides** for B700 per person.

At the base of the west coast, **Ao Phangka** (Emerald Cove) is a pretty horseshoe bay, sheltered by **Laem Hin Khom**, the high headland that forms Samui's south-western tip. On the south-facing shore of Laem Hin Khom, the quiet *Coconut Villa* (Ⓣ & Ⓕ077 423151, Ⓔcoconutvilla@sawadee.com; fan ③, air-con ⑤) commands stunning views of Ko Mad Sum and its neighbouring islands; the fan-cooled or air-con bungalows all have en-suite bathrooms, the food is recommended, and there's an excellent swimming pool set in attractive gardens by the sea.

Further up the coast, the flat beaches are unexceptional but make a calm alternative when the northeast winds hit the other side of the island. In a gorgeous, elevated setting near **Ban Taling Ngam** village, *Le Royal Meridien Baan Taling Ngam* (Ⓣ077 429100, Ⓦwww.meridien-samui.com; ⑨) boasts a dramatic, hill-top swimming pool with a negative edge, as well as another pool beachside. The accommodation is in villas – some with their own pools – or balconied rooms on the resort's steep slopes, luxuriously decorated in traditional style. There's a spa and a Thai cookery school, and the hotel lays on the largest array of sports and watersports facilities on the island.

Ko Pha Ngan

In recent years, backpackers have tended to move over to Ko Samui's fun-loving little sibling, **KO PHA NGAN**, 20km to the north, but the island still has a simple atmosphere, mostly because the lousy road system is an impediment to the developers. With a dense jungle covering its inland mountains and rugged granite outcrops along the coast, Pha Ngan lacks the huge, gently sweeping beaches for which Samui is famous, but it does have plenty of coral to explore and some beautiful, sheltered bays: if you're seeking total isolation, trek out to **Hat Khuat** (**Bottle Beach**) on the north coast or the half-dozen pristine beaches on the east coast; **Thong Nai Pan** at the top of the east coast is not quite as remote, and offers a decent range of amenities and accommodation; while on the long neck of land at the southeast corner, **Hat Rin**, a pilgrimage site for ravers, is a thoroughly commercialized backpackers' resort in a gorgeous setting. Much of Pha Ngan's development has plonked itself on the south and west sides along the only coastal roads on the island, which fan out from **Thong Sala**, the capital; the unattractive south coast is hard to recommend, but the west coast offers several handsome sandy bays with great sunset views, notably **Hat Yao** and **Hat Salad**.


KO PHA NGAN
Ko Maa
Hat Khom
Ao Chaloaklam
Ao Mae Hat
Hat Khuat (Bottle Beach)
Hat Salad
Ban Chaloaklam
Hat Yao
Ao Thong Nai Pan
Thaan Prawet Waterfall
Hat Son
Ao Chaophao
Laem Son Lake
Khao Ra (627m)
Ao Seethanu
Ban Hin Kong
Hat Sadet
Ban Thong Nang
Thaan Sadet
Ban Madeuawaan
Ao Wogtum (Hinkong)
Ko Tao
Pang Waterfall
Thaan Praphat Waterfall
Police Station
Hat Yang
Thong Sala
Wat Khao Tham
Hat Yao
Ko Samui & Surat Thani
Hat Wai Nam
Ban Tai
Ban Khai
Hat Thian
Hat Yuan
N
See 'Hat Rin' map
Hat Rin (Sunset)
Hat Rin (Sunrise)
0
4 km
Lighthouse
Ko Samui (Bangrak)

Pha Ngan's **bungalows** all have running water and electricity (on the remotest beaches, only in the evenings and from individual generators), and nearly all come with en-suite bathrooms. There are only a handful of luxury resorts, though plenty of places now offer air-con, especially on Hat Rin. The three hundred or so resorts generally have more space to spread out than on Ko Samui, and the cost of living is lower; the prices given on the following pages are standard for most of the year, but in slack periods you'll be offered discounts, and at the very busiest times (especially Dec and Jan) Pha Ngan's bungalow owners are canny enough to raise the stakes. As on Ko Samui, nearly all the bungalow resorts have inexpensive, traveller-oriented **restaurants**, supplemented on Hat Rin and at one or two other spots around the island by a variety of stand-alone eateries. **Nightlife** is concentrated at Hat Rin, climaxing every month in a wild **full-moon party** on the beach; a couple of smaller outdoor **parties** have now got in on the act, the Half Moon Festival at Ban Tai (twice monthly, about a week before and after the full moon; Ⓦ www.halfmoonfestival.com) and the monthly Black Moon Party at Ban Khai.

There's no TAT office on Ko Pha Ngan, but a couple of free, widely available booklets provide regularly updated **information** about the island, *Phangan Info* (which has a particularly good website at Ⓦwww.phangan.info) and *Phangan Explorer* (Ⓦwww.phanganexplorer.com). If you're going to be exploring, well worth picking up from supermarkets on the island is Visid Hongsombud's excellent, annually updated **map** of Ko Pha Ngan and Ko Tao (B100). The island isn't a great base for **scuba-diving**: getting to the best sites around Ko Tao involves time-consuming and expensive voyages, and there aren't as many dive companies here as on Ko Samui or Ko Tao – of those that exist, Phangan Divers on Hat Rin, Thong Nai Pan, Ao Mae Hat and Hat Yao (Ⓣ077 375117, Ⓦwww.phangandivers.com) is a PADI Five-Star Centre, which offers frequent trips to Sail Rock and the Ang Thong Marine Park.

Getting to Ko Pha Ngan

The most obvious way of getting to Ko Pha Ngan is on a **boat** from the **Surat Thani** area; for contact details of transport companies in Surat, see p.294. Boat services fluctuate according to demand, but the longest-established ferry is the night boat from Ban Don pier in Surat Thani to Thong Sala, which leaves at 11pm every night (Ⓣ077 284928 or 081 326 8973; 6hr; B250); tickets are available from the pier on the day of departure. From Don Sak to Thong Sala, there are four Raja vehicle ferries a day (2hr 30min; B290; on Ko Pha Ngan Ⓣ077 377452–3) and one Seatran vehicle ferry (via Na Thon on Ko Samui; 2hr 30min; B280; on Ko Pha Ngan Ⓣ077 238129); from Pak Nam Tapi, there's one Songserm Express Boat service a day (3hr 30min; B250; on Ko Pha Ngan Ⓣ077 377046); all the above include bus transport to the pier from Surat Thani. Note that the total journey time (from Surat Thani) using the vehicle ferries from Don Sak is much the same as on the Songserm Express Boat from Pak Nam Tapi. **From Bangkok**, bus and train packages similar to those for getting to Ko Samui are available (see p.298).

One Songserm Express Boat a day does the 45-minute trip from Na Thon on **Ko Samui** to Thong Sala (B130), while a Seatran vehicle ferry does the same voyage once a day in an hour (B110). Two Seatran express boats a day from Bangrak and the Lomprayah catamaran from Wat Na Phra Larn on Maenam (twice a day; sometimes from Bangrak in rough seas; Ko Samui Ⓣ077 427765–6, Ko Pha Ngan Ⓣ077 238412, Ⓦwww.lomprayah.com) call in at Thong Sala after thirty minutes (B250), on their way to Ko Tao. There's also a daily Phangan Cruises boat from Bangrak to Thong Sala (45min; B150; on Pha Ngan Ⓣ077 377274, Samui Ⓣ089 473 4836), which continues to Ko Tao. From Bangrak, four passenger boats a day take an hour to cross to Hat Rin (B120; Ⓣ077 484668 or 077 427650). If there are enough takers and the weather's good enough – generally reliable between January and September – one small boat a day crosses from the pier in Ban Maenam to Hat Rin (B120), before sailing up Ko Pha Ngan's east coast, via Hat Sadet and anywhere else upon demand, to Thong Nai Pan (B300).

For information about boats from **Ko Tao** to Ko Pha Ngan see p.333; all offer the same service in the return direction.

Thong Sala and the south coast

Like the capital of Samui, **THONG SALA** is a port of entrance and little more, where the incoming ferries are met by touts sent to escort travellers to bungalows elsewhere on the island. In front of the piers, transport to the rest of the island (songthaews, jeeps and motorbike taxis) congregates by a dusty row of banks, supermarkets, Internet cafés, scuba-diving outfits and motorbike (B150–200/day) and jeep (B800–1000) rental places. Among many travellers' **restaurants** here, *Yellow Café*, on the corner in front of the main pier, a few doors up from *Pha Ngan Chai Hotel*, is a good, friendly choice, serving tasty coffee, baguettes, baked potatoes and other Western meals. If you go straight ahead from the main pier, you can turn right onto the town's old high street, a leafy mix of shops and houses that's ghostly and windswept at night. A short way down here you'll find Hammock Home, which makes and sells a colourful selection of home-made hammocks, shoulder bags and sarongs, and, set back on the west side of the street, Phangan Batik (daily 10am–10pm), which offers cheap Internet access. Further on are a couple of clinics and, about 500m from the pier after a dog-leg left, the **post office** (Mon–Fri 8.30am–noon & 1–4.30pm, Sat 9am–noon). Thong Sala's sprinkling of travel agents can organize train, bus and plane tickets, and visa extensions, and they sometimes put together speedboat trips to Ang Thong National Marine Park for around B1600 a head (see p.325). The island's main **hospital** (ⓣ077 377034) lies 3km north of town, on the inland road towards Mae Hat, while the **police station** (ⓣ077 377114) is nearly 2km up the Ban Chaloaklam road. Cuttlebone (ⓣ081 940 1902, ⓦwww.cuttlebone.net), based at *Golden Light Resort*, about 1km from Thong Sala on the Hat Rin road, runs **kitesurfing** courses.

In the vicinity of Thong Sala, an easy excursion can be made to the grandiosely termed Than Sadet–Ko Pha Ngan National Park, which contains **Pang Waterfall**, Pha Ngan's biggest drop, and a stunning viewpoint overlooking the south and west of the island. The park lies 4km northeast of Thong Sala off the road to Chaloaklam – if you don't have a bike, take a Chaloaklam-bound songthaew as far as Ban Madeuawaan, and then it's a one-kilometre signposted walk east. A roughly circular trail has been laid out through the park, as mapped out by the signboard in the car park. The main fall – bouncing down in stages over the hard, grey stone – is a steep 250-metre walk up a forest path. The trail then continues for over 1km upriver beyond the falls, before skirting through thick rainforest to the viewpoint and back to the car park in a couple of hours.

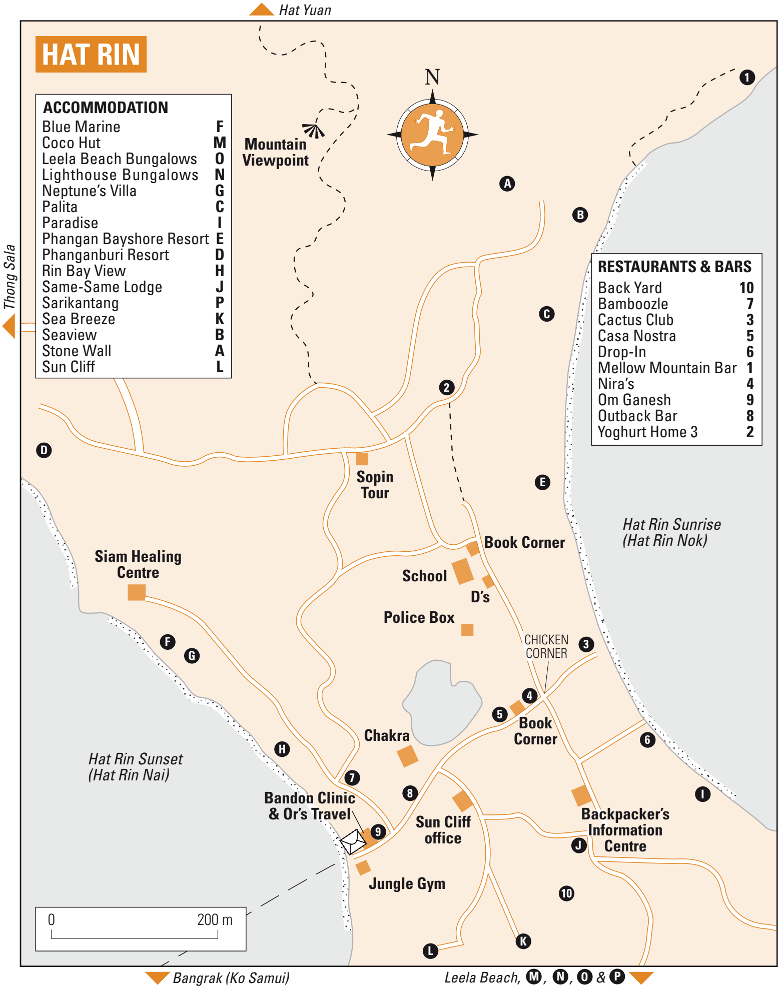
The long, straight **south coast** is well served by songthaews and motorbike taxis from Thong Sala, and is lined with bungalows, especially around **Ban Khai**, to take the overspill from nearby Hat Rin. It's hard to recommend staying here, however: the beaches are mediocre by Thai standards, and the coral reef that hugs the length of the shoreline gets in the way of swimming.

On a quiet hillside above **Ban Tai**, 4km from Thong Sala, **Wat Khao Tham** holds ten-day **meditation retreats** most months of the year (B4000/person to cover food; minimum age 20, with further requirements for under-26s during the high season); the American and Australian teachers emphasize compassionate understanding as the basis of mental development. Space is limited (retreats are especially heavily subscribed Dec–March), so it's best to pre-register either in person or through ⓦwww.watkowtahm.org, which gives full details of rules and requirements and the schedule of retreats.

If you need to **stay** around Thong Sala, walk 800m north out of town to *Siripun* (ⓣ077 377140, ⓦwww.siripunbungalow.com; fan ③, air-con ⑤). The owner is helpful, the food very good and kayaks and Internet access are available. The bungalows are clean and well positioned along the beach; all have showers and mosquito screens on the windows, and an extra wad of baht buys air-con, hot water, fridge, TV and one of the island's few bathtubs. Alternatively, *Charm Beach Resort*, a friendly, easy-going place in a sprawling, rag-tag plot on the beach only 1500m southeast of Thong Sala (ⓣ077 377165, ⓦwww.triptrekkers.com/charmbeach; fan ③, air-con ⑤), has a wide variety of decent bungalows (some with air-con and hot water) and good Thai food. The incongruous white high-rise overshadowing Thong Sala's pier is the *Pha Ngan Chai Hotel* (ⓣ & ⓕ077 377068–9; ④), which makes a fair stab at international-standard features for visiting businessmen and government officials, with air-con, hot water, TVs, fridges and, in some rooms, sea-view balconies.

Hat Rin

HAT RIN is now firmly established as the major party venue in Southeast Asia, especially in the peak season of December and January, but every month of the year people flock in for the **full moon party** – something like *Apocalypse Now* without the war. The atmosphere created by thousands of folk mashing it up on a beautiful, moon-bathed beach, lit up by fireworks and fire-jugglers, ought to be enough of a buzz in itself, but unfortunately drug-related horror stories are common currency here, and many of them are true: dodgy Ecstasy, *yaa baa* (Burmese-manufactured methamphetamines) and all manner of other concoctions put an average of two farangs a month into hospital for psychiatric treatment. The local authorities have started clamping down on the trade in earnest, setting up a permanent police box at Hat Rin, instigating regular roadblocks and bungalow searches,


Hat Yuan
HAT RIN
ACCOMMODATION
Blue Marine F
Coco Hut M
Leela Beach Bungalows O
Lighthouse Bungalows N
Neptune's Villa G
Palita C
Paradise I
Phangan Bayshore Resort E
Phanganburi Resort D
Rin Bay View H
Same-Same Lodge J
Sarikantang P
Sea Breeze K
Seaview B
Stone Wall A
Sun Cliff L
N
Mountain Viewpoint
Thong Sala
RESTAURANTS & BARS
Back Yard 10
Bamboozle 7
Cactus Club 3
Casa Nostra 5
Drop-In 6
Mellow Mountain Bar 1
Nira's 4
Om Ganesh 9
Outback Bar 8
Yoghurt Home 3 2
Sopin Tour
Book Corner
School
D's
Police Box
Siam Healing Centre
Hat Rin Sunrise (Hat Rin Nok)
CHICKEN CORNER
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Hat Rin Sunset (Hat Rin Nai)
Bandon Clinic & Or's Travel
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Backpacker's Information Centre
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Leela Beach, M, N, O & P

and drafting in scores of police (both uniformed and plain-clothes) on full moon nights. It doesn't seem to have dampened the fun, only made travellers a lot more circumspect. Other **tips** for surviving the full moon are mostly common sense: leave your valuables in your resort's safe – it's a bad night for bungalow break-ins – and don't take a bag out with you; watch out for broken bottles on the beach; and do not go swimming while under the influence – there have been several deaths by drowning at previous full-moon parties. Note that when the full moon coincides with an important **Buddhist festival**, the party is moved one night away to avoid a clash; check out Ⓦ www.fullmoon-party.com for details.

Hat Rin occupies the flat neck of Pha Ngan's southeast headland, which is so narrow that the resort comprises two back-to-back beaches, joined by transverse roads at the north and south ends. The eastern beach, usually referred to as **Sunrise**, or Hat Rin Nok (Outer Hat Rin), is what originally drew visitors here, a classic curve of fine white sand between two rocky slopes; there's still some coral off the southern slope to explore, though the water is far from limpid these days. This beach is the centre of Hat Rin's action, with a solid line of bars, restaurants and bungalows tucked under the palm trees. **Sunset** beach, or Hat Rin Nai (Inner Hat Rin), which for much of the year is littered with flotsam, looks ordinary by comparison but has plenty of quieter accommodation. Unfortunately, development between the beaches does no justice to the setting: it's ugly, cramped and chaotic, with new low-rise concrete shophouses thrown up at any old angle. Half-hearted attempts to tart up the large body of water in the middle of the headland with a few park benches and lights have been undermined by all-too-accurate signposts pointing to "Hat Rin Swamp".

Practicalities

The awkwardness of **getting to Hat Rin** in the past helped to maintain its individuality, but this has changed now that the road in from Ban Khai has been paved. All the same, it's a winding, precipitous roller coaster of a route, covered by songthaews and motorbike taxis from Thong Sala – take care if you're driving your own motorbike. The easiest approach of all, however, if you're coming from Ko Samui, or even Surat Thani, is by direct boat from Bangrak on Samui's north coast (see p.319): four boats a day cross to the pier on Sunset beach in under an hour.

The area behind and between the beaches – especially around what's known as Chicken Corner, where the southern transverse road meets the road along the back of Sunrise – is crammed with shops and businesses, including supermarkets, overseas phone facilities, dozens of Internet outlets, plenty of ATMs and bank currency-exchange booths.

Accommodation

For most of the year, Hat Rin has enough bungalows to cope, but on **full moon nights** over ten thousand revellers may turn up. Your options are either to arrive at least a day early (especially during the Dec–Jan peak season), to forget about sleep altogether, or to hitch up with one of the many **party boats** (about B400 return/person) organized through guest houses and restaurants on Ko Samui, especially at Bangrak and Bophut, which usually leave between 9pm and midnight and return after dawn; there's also generally transport by boat or car from other beaches on Pha Ngan. Even at other times, staying on **Sunrise** is often expensive and noisy, though a few places can be recommended. On **Sunset**, the twenty or more resorts are laid out in orderly rows, and are especially quiet and inexpensive between April and June and in October. Many visitors choose to stay on the **headland** to the south of the main beaches, especially at white-sand, palm-fringed **Leela Beach**, which is a twenty-minute walk along a well-signposted route from Chicken Corner, on the west side of the headland. At any of the places out here your bungalow is likely to have more peace and space and better views, leaving you a torchlit walk to the night-time action.

Blue Marine Next to *Neptune's Villa* on Sunset Ⓣ077 375079–80, Ⓕ077 375407. In a broad, grassy compound, cheap, en-suite bungalows made of white clapboard and concrete, all with mosquito screens and hammocks, some with hot water, and large, tiled cottages with air-con and hot showers. Fan ②, air-con ⑥

Coco Hut Leela Beach Ⓣ077 375368, Ⓦwww.cocohut.com. On a clean, quiet stretch of beach, this lively, efficiently run place is smart and attractive, painted ochre and with some traditional southern Thai elements in the architecture. On offer is a huge variety of accommodation, from rooms with fans and cold water to bungalows with air-con and hot water, an attractive pool and Internet access. Fan ④, air-con ⑦

Leela Beach Bungalows Leela Beach Ⓣ077 375094 or 081 995 1304, Ⓦwww.leelabeach.com. A good, friendly and reliable budget choice with plenty of space under the palm trees and almost half of the white-sand beach to itself. The no-frills bungalows are sturdy and well built and all have fans and en-suite bathrooms; air-con cottages with hot water are planned. ②

Lighthouse Bungalows On the far southwestern tip of the headland Ⓣ077 375075, Ⓦwww.lighthousebungalows.com. Free boat-taxi from Sunset pier thrice daily, or a 30min walk from Chicken Corner, the last section along a wooden walkway over the rocky shoreline. At this friendly haven, wooden and concrete bungalows, sturdily built to withstand the wind and backed by trail-filled jungle, either share bathrooms or have their own. The restaurant food is varied and tasty. The owners have plans to upgrade the bungalows, so rates may rise. ②–⑤

Neptune's Villa Near the small promontory at the centre of Sunset Ⓣ077 375251. Popular, well-run place, in a narrow but lovingly tended garden giving onto the beach. The wide variety of smart accommodation ranges from fan-cooled cottages with their own hot-water bathrooms, to air-con rooms with hot showers and fridges. Fan ③, air-con ⑦

Palita At the northern end of Sunrise Ⓣ077 375170–1 or 081 917 7455, Ⓔpalitas9@hotmail.com. Clean, well-run place on a broad plot that stretches a long way back from the beach. Building was ongoing at the time of writing, but most of the accommodation is in smart, white-clapboard bungalows with either fans and cold showers or air-con and hot water. The food gets rave reviews. Fan ③, air-con ⑥

Paradise Spread over the far southern end of Sunrise and up the slope behind Ⓣ077 375244–5, Ⓦwww.paradisebungalow.com. Well-established place, with plenty of room and a good restaurant – the original full moon party began here, and it's still a party focus once a month. There's a range of rooms and bungalows of different sizes, but all are en suite with fans and some have air-con and hot water; those further up the hillside offer fine views over the bay from their verandas. Fan ②, air-con ⑤

Phangan Bayshore Resort In the middle of Sunrise Ⓣ077 375227, Ⓦwww.phanganbayshore.com. Hat Rin's first upmarket resort, a well-ordered place, though staff seem somewhat jaded. Big, en-suite bungalows with spacious verandas, some with hot water and air-con, are set on a broad, green lawn, shaded with palms. Fan ④, air-con ⑥

Phanganburi Resort Towards the north end of Sunset beach Ⓣ077 375481, Ⓦwww.phanganburiresort.net. Welcoming, new luxury complex that encompasses three hotel blocks, dozens of bungalows, a small spa and two very attractive pools in its extensive, beachside grounds. Decorated in a simple but smart Thai style, all the rooms have air-con, hot water, fridge and satellite TV. Internet access and wi-fi. ⑦

Rin Bay View Near the pier on Sunset Ⓣ077 375188. A good-value, friendly option in a central location, occupying a narrow strip of land – though not too tightly squeezed – and ornamented with flowers and trees. The en-suite bungalows with mosquito screens and balconies are a decent size and generally well maintained and clean. Price varies according to size and distance from the beach, and whether they are fan-cooled or air-con, with hot or cold water. Fan ②, air-con ⑤

Same-Same Lodge Above Sunrise at the start of the road to Leela Beach Ⓣ077 375200, Ⓦwww.same-same.com. Well-run, welcoming and sociable Thai-Scandinavian spot. Above a popular restaurant, clean, well-maintained and decent-sized rooms come with fan and cold showers or air-con and hot water. Unusually for Hat Rin, cheaper rates for single occupation. Fan ③, air-con ④

Sarikantang Leela Beach Ⓣ077 375055–6, Ⓦwww.sarikantang.com. Boutique resort with a swimming pool, a beachside spa and a good measure of style, though housekeeping could be better. Accommodation ranges from rooms with fans, verandas and cold-water bathrooms to chic, white-painted "superior" rooms with air-con, hot showers, TVs and separate outdoor sunken baths. Internet access and kayaks for rent (B100/hr). Fan ⑤, air-con ⑥

Sea Breeze Next to and above *Sun Cliff* ☎077 375162. Sprawling untidily over the ridge from near the southern transverse all the way to the north end of Leela Beach (with steps down to the sand), this place has plenty of space and views out to the west. Choose between older en-suite bungalows with fans, and large, smart, new villas on stilts, with air-con, hot water, fridges, big decks and great sunset vistas. A swimming pool is planned, so expect rates to go up. Fan ③, air-con ⑥

Seaview At the quieter northern end of Sunrise ☎077 375160. On a big plot of shady land, this clean, orderly place offers simple, en-suite huts at the back, posher bungalows with air-con and cold showers beachside. Fan ③, air-con ⑤

Stone Wall ☎077 375460 or 081 080 5924, Ⓔstonewallbungalow1@hotmail.com. Friendly resort recently opened by a family who were forced to leave Ko Lanta after the 2004 tsunami. The stiff, 5min walk up behind *Seaview* – there is a primitive lift – is rewarded with great views of the Hat Rin peninsula and Samui. On the steeply sloping, lush plot are simple, cheap en-suite bungalows with verandas and hammocks to catch the breeze, and a quiet restaurant serving good Thai and Western food. ②

Sun Cliff High up on the tree-lined slope above the south end of Sunset ☎077 375134. Friendly place with great views of the south coast and Ko Samui, and a wide range of bright, well-maintained bungalows, some with large balconies, fridges, hot water and air-con. Fan ②, air-con ⑤

Eating

As well as good simple Thai fare at some of the bungalows, Hat Rin sports an unnerving choice of world **foods** for somewhere so remote, and vegetarians are unusually well provided for.

Bamboozle Off the southern transverse, near Sunset pier. Among a wide variety of tasty Mexican food here, the chicken fajitas with all the trimmings are especially good.

Casa Nostra On the southern transverse, opposite 7-11. Excellent, small, Italian café-restaurant which prepares great pastas – try the spaghetti bolognese – pizzas (whole or by the slice), espresso coffee, salads and plenty of other dishes for vegetarians, such as cannelloni with ricotta and spinach, and a chocolate mousse to die for. Daily 2pm–midnight.

Nira's Near Chicken Corner. Justly popular restaurant, bar and 24hr bakery offering great all-day breakfasts of croissants, cakes and good coffees and teas, as well as sandwiches, quiches and more substantial Western main courses.

Om Ganesh On the southern transverse near the pier. Excellent, relaxing Indian restaurant with good vegetarian and non-vegetarian thalis, cheerful service and outdoor tables that are good for people-watching.

Yoghurt Home 3 Behind the north end of Sunrise, on the northern transverse. Although this establishment is now mostly devoted to a travel agency, it still offers home-made yoghurt in many combinations, including tzatziki, a wide range of coffees, teas and shakes, and cheap, generous servings of Thai and Western veggie and non-veggie food, including a tasty vegetable tempura.

Nightlife

Nightlife normally begins at the south end of Sunrise at open-air dancehalls such as the *Cactus Club* and *Drop-In*, which pump out mostly radio-friendly dance music onto low-slung candlelit tables and mats on the beach. Inland on the southern transverse, *Outback Bar* is a lively meeting place with pool tables, big-screen sports and well-received steak pies and the like. For somewhere to chill, head for *Mellow Mountain Bar*, which occupies a great position up in the rocks on the north side of Sunrise, with peerless views of the beach. Up the hill behind the southern end of Sunrise, off the path to Leela Beach, *Back Yard*, with a large balcony area overlooking the beach, hosts a progressive set on Sundays.

On **full moon night**, *Paradise* is the main party host, sometimes bringing in big-name international DJs. However, the mayhem spreads along most of Sunrise, fuelled by hastily erected drinks stalls and around a dozen major sound systems – listen out for psy-trance and driving techno at *Zoom* and *The Vinyl Club*, and drum'n'bass at *Orchid* further up the beach. Next day, as the beach party winds down, *Back Yard* kicks off its afterparty at around eleven in the morning, with the best of the previous night's DJs.

Listings

Boat trips Several places on Hat Rin, such as Sopin Tour on the northern transverse (ⓣ077 375092), organize day-trips up the east coast and back, typically charging B500 (including simple lunch and snorkelling equipment) and taking in Mae Hat, Thong Nai Pan, Hat Khuat and Thaan Sadet. Or's Travel on the southern transverse (ⓣ081 719 6057) organizes speedboat tours to Ang Thong National Marine Park (see p.300) for B1600 per person.

Bookshops Two branches of Book Corner, behind Sunrise beach near the school and on the southern transverse, carry a decent line of new fiction, guides and books about Thailand and Southeast Asia. D's, also near the school behind Sunrise, is good for second-hand books.

Clinic Bandon International Hospital, a large private hospital on Ko Samui, run a clinic on the southern transverse near the pier (ⓣ077 375471–2, ⓦwww.bandonhospital.com).

Cookery courses *Same-Same Lodge* (see p.323) runs Thai cooking classes lasting one (B900), three (B2500) or five (B4200) days.

Gym Jungle Gym (ⓦwww.junglegym.co.th), near the pier, offers Thai boxing classes, a steam room, yoga and a juice bar.

Massages Chakra, in an alley off the southern transverse (ⓣ077 375401, ⓦwww.islandwebs.com/thailand/chakra.htm), does the best massages in Hat Rin, and also runs massage courses. Siam Healing Centre, on the small promontory at the centre of Sunset (ⓣ077 375450–1), offers the same, plus yoga, meditation and t'ai chi.

Post office On the southern transverse, near the pier on Sunset.

Travel agent The excellent, English-Thai Backpackers Information Centre, based to the south of Chicken Corner (ⓣ077 375535, ⓦwww.backpackersthailand.com), is a very reliable and clued-up full-service travel agency, which can make bookings and give advice on local tours and travel throughout Thailand and Asia; in the shop, you can consult a large database of advice and comments from previous customers. Also agents for Lotus Diving.

Vehicle rental Plenty of places on Hat Rin rent jeeps (B1000/day) and motorbikes (from B150/day). There have been lots of reports, however, of travellers being charged exorbitant amounts if they bring the vehicle back with even the most minor damage – at the very least, check the vehicle over very carefully before renting. *Sun Cliff* (see opposite), who have an office just off the southern transverse, is a reliable place for motorbikes, and won't try this scam.

The east coast

North of Hat Rin, the rocky, exposed **east coast** stretches as far as Ao Thong Nai Pan, the only substantial centre of development. No roads run along this coast, only a rough, steep, fifteen-kilometre trail, which starts from Hat Rin's northern transverse road (near *La Luna Bungalows*, waymarked with green painted dots as far as Hat Yuan) and runs reasonably close to the shore, occasionally dipping down into pristine sandy coves with a smattering of bungalows. From roughly January to September, one small boat a day runs via the east coast beaches from Hat Rin to Thong Nai Pan (see p.319), having started its voyage across at Maenam on Ko Samui. Otherwise there are ample longtails on Sunrise that will taxi you up the coast – around B150 to Hat Thian, for example. See above for information about organized day-trips by boat up this coast from Hat Rin.

Hat Yuan, Hat Thian and Hat Wai Nam

About ninety minutes up the trail, the adjoining small, sandy bays of **HAT YUAN**, **HAT THIAN** and **HAT WAI NAM** have established a reputation as a quieter alternative to Hat Rin and now sport about a dozen bungalow outfits between them. On Hat Yuan, *Barcelona* (ⓣ077 375113; ❷–❹) is a good choice, with plenty of space, great views and well-built accommodation either in en-suite huts or white bungalows with large verandas. Accommodation on Hat Thian is available at the friendly *Haad Tien Resort* (ⓣ081 229 3919; ①), with en-suite wood or concrete bungalows in a large coconut grove on the slope above the beach; and at the *Sanctuary* (ⓣ081 271 3614, ⓦwww.thesanctuary-kpg.com; ③–⑥), which offers a huge range of basic and luxury en-suite bungalows and family houses, as well as dorm accommodation (B80), kayaking and good vegetarian fare, seafood and home-made bread and cakes. It also hosts courses in yoga, meditation and the like, and provides two diverse kinds of treatment: the Spa does massage, facials and beauty treatments, while the Wellness Centre goes in for fasting and cleansing. *Why Nam Huts* (②; for information, contact *Yoghurt Home 3* in Hat Rin, see p.324) has Hat Wai Nam to itself, in a rocky, stream-fed bay that's good for snorkelling; the large, en-suite bungalows come with fans and hammocks, and the restaurant offers home-baked bread and plenty of vegetarian dishes.

Hat Sadet

Steep, remote **HAT SADET**, 12km up the trail from Hat Rin, has a handful of bungalow operations, sited here because of their proximity to **Thaan Sadet**, a boulder-strewn brook that runs out into the sea. The spot was popularized by various kings of Thailand who came here to walk, swim and vandalize the huge boulders by carving their initials on them. A rough track has been bulldozed through the woods above and parallel to Thaan Sadet to connect with the unpaved road from Thong Sala to Ao Thong Nai Pan. Best of the bungalows is the welcoming *Mai Pen Rai* (ⓣ077 445090, ⓦwww.thansadet.com; ②–⑤), which has a variety of attractive, characterful accommodation with airy bathrooms (some with big upstairs terraces), either on the beach at the stream mouth or scattered around the rocks for good views; a jeep taxi leaves Thong Sala for the resort every day at 1pm (B100).

Ao Thong Nai Pan

AO THONG NAI PAN is a beautiful, semicircular bay backed by steep, green hills, which looks as if it's been bitten out of the island's northeast corner by a gap-toothed giant, leaving a tall hump of land dividing the bay into two parts, Thong Nai Pan Noi to the north, Thong Nai Pan Yai to the south. With lovely, fine, white sand, the longer, more indented Thong Nai Pan Yai has marginally the better beach, but both halves are sheltered and deep enough for swimming. The bay is now developed enough for tourism to support a few Internet shops, travel agents, dive outfits, bars, stand-alone restaurants and an ATM (on Thong Nai Pan Yai). A bumpy nightmare of a road, partly paved though mostly dirt, winds its way for 13km over the steep mountains from Ban Tai on the south coast to Thong Nai Pan: jeeps (B100/person) connect with incoming and outgoing boats at Thong Sala every day.

A dozen or so resorts line the southern half of the bay, **Thong Nai Pan Yai**. Near its centre, the friendly *Pingjun* (ⓣ077 299004; ②) has a range of battered, old-style, wooden bungalows with fans, mosquito nets, en-suite bathrooms, verandas and hammocks, set in a large, grassy compound on a broad stretch of beach. At the quieter southern end, *Dolphin* (no phone; ②) is a popular, tranquil spot, overgrown with lush vegetation and with lots of comfortable salas to recline in. The large, very clean bungalows come with fans, mosquito nets and en-suite bathrooms, and the beachfront restaurant, which serves good Western breakfasts and lunches and great coffee, turns into a mellow bar at night. In a colourful garden next door, friendly *White Sand* (ⓣ077 445125, ⓔthailasse@msn.com; ③) offers smart, comfortable bungalows with en-suite bathrooms. **Boat trips** are available here, taking in Ao Mae Hat, Hat Khuat and Thaan Sadet.

The steep slopes of the central outcrop make a beautiful setting for *Panviman* (Ⓣ077 445101–9, Ⓦwww.panviman.com; ⑧–⑨), one of Ko Pha Ngan's few attempts at a luxury resort, comprising a swimming pool, a small massage spa, and air-conditioned cottages and hotel-style rooms with verandas, hot water, satellite TV and mini-bars. For non-guests it's worth making the climb up here for the view from the restaurant perched over the cliff edge.

On the northern beach, **Thong Nai Pan Noi**, *Star Huts* (Ⓣ077 445085, Ⓔstar_hut@hotmail.com; fan ③, air-con ⑤) is probably the best choice: very clean, well-maintained bungalows, with en-suite hot or cold showers, line the sand, and the friendly owners dish up good food and offer Internet access. Styling itself as "upmarket budget accommodation", nearby *Baan Panburi* (Ⓣ077 238599, Ⓦwww.baanpanburi.bigstep.com; ③–⑧) has a slightly institutional feel. Attractive, well-designed huts and bungalows, some of them a little cramped together, are set among flowers and come in a variety of sizes and styles, either with ceiling fans and cold showers or with air-con and hot water. The food is good, there's a massage house and small spa, and cooking classes and kayaks are available. Set back from the beach near *Star Huts*, *Mr Handsome* rustles up decent sandwiches, except when he's leading **day-trips to Ang Thong Marine Park** in a big longtail boat (Ⓣ086 278 8119, Ⓔhandsomesandwiches@hotmail.com; B900 including snorkelling and lunch; minimum eight people).

The north coast

The village of **BAN CHALOAKLAM**, on Ao Chaloaklam, the largest bay on the **north coast**, has long been a famous R&R spot for fishermen from all over the Gulf of Thailand, with sometimes as many as a hundred trawlers littering the broad and sheltered bay. As a tourist destination, it has little to recommend it save that it can easily be reached from Thong Sala, 10km away, by songthaew or motorbike taxi along a paved road. **Hat Khom** has more to offer, a tiny cove dramatically tucked in under the headland to the east, with a secluded strip of white sand and good coral for snorkelling. Here, friendly *Coral Bay* (Ⓣ077 374245; ①–④) has plenty of space and great views on the grassy promontory dividing Hat Khom from Ao Chaloaklam. The sturdy bungalows range from simple affairs with mosquito nets and shared bathrooms to large pads with funky bathrooms built into the rock; snorkelling equipment is available to make the most of Hat Khom's reef. Phangan Adventure, based at *Lotus Dive Resort* in Ban Chaloaklam (Ⓣ077 374142, Ⓦwww.phanganadventure.com), offers all manner of **adventure activities** on land and sea: an array of boat trips, including Ang Thong Marine Park (kayaking optional), kayak rental, wakeboarding and mountain-bike tours and rental.

If the sea is not too rough, longtail boats run three times a day for most of the year from Ban Chaloaklam to isolated **HAT KHUAT** (**Bottle Beach**), the best of the beaches on the north coast, sitting between steep hills in a perfect cup of a bay; you could also walk there along a testing trail from Hat Khom in around ninety minutes. Among a handful of resorts here, the best is *Smile Resort* (②), which has a pleasant, quiet setting for its en-suite, fan-cooled bungalows, on a pretty flower-strewn hillside at the western end of the beach.

The west coast

Pha Ngan's **west coast** has attracted about the same amount of development as the forgettable south coast, but the landscape here is more attractive and varied, broken up into a series of long sandy inlets with good sunset views over the islands of the Ang Thong National Marine Park to the west; most of the bays, however, are sheltered by reefs which can keep the sea too shallow for a decent swim, especially between May and October. The coast road from Thong Sala as far up as Hat Yao is in decent condition, as is the inland road via the hospital, which loops round, with a paved side road down to Hat Salad, past Ao Mae Hat to Ban Chaloaklam. However, the road between Hat Yao and Hat Salad has not as yet been similarly upgraded, and can be testing if you're on a bike. Taxis, motorbike taxis and sometimes boats cover the whole coast.

The first bay north of Thong Sala, Ao Wogtum (aka Hinkong), yawns wide across a featureless expanse that turns into a mud flat when the sea retreats behind the reef barrier at low tide. The nondescript bay of **AO SEETHANU** beyond is home to the excellent *Loy Fa* (Ⓣ077 377319, Ⓔloyfa@yahoo.com; fan ④, air-con ⑦), a well-run place that commands good views from its perch on top of Seethanu's steep southern cape, and offers decent snorkelling and swimming from its private beach below; bungalows are either on the hilltop or down on the beach, and come with fan and cold showers or air-con, hot water and mini-bar; Internet access is available.

Ao Chaophao

Continuing north, there's a surprise in store in the shape of **Laem Son Lake**, a beautiful, tranquil stretch of clear water cordoned by pines. However, as with any freshwater lake in Thailand, you should avoid swimming here; furthermore, there have been unconfirmed reports that this lake is toxic. To the west of the lake by the beach, Agama (Ⓣ089 233 0217, Ⓦwww.agamayoga.com), based at the otherwise unremarkable *Bovy Resort*, offers **yoga** classes and certificate courses, from beginners to advanced. *Seethanu Bungalows* (Ⓣ077 349113, Ⓕ077 349112; fan ②, air-con ⑤), actually round the next headland on the small, pretty bay of **AO CHAOPHAO**, is a lively spot with a popular restaurant; sturdy, characterful wooden and concrete bungalows (all en suite) are arrayed around a colourful garden, with the more expensive options, with air-con and hot water, by the beach. Next door, 🏃 *Seaflower* (Ⓣ077 349090, Ⓕ077 349091; ②–⑤) is quieter and more congenial, set in a well-tended garden, and the veggie and non-veggie food is excellent. En-suite bungalows with their own bathrooms vary in price according to their size and age: the newer ones – more like cottages – have marble open-air bathrooms and big balcony seating areas. If you're feeling adventurous, ask the owner about the occasional three-day, two-night longtail-boat treks to Ang Thong National Marine Park (see p.300), which involve snorkelling, caving, catching your own seafood, and sleeping in tents on the beach (B3000/person, including food and soft drinks; minimum ten people). The adjacent, English-run *Village Green* pub-restaurant keeps the punters happy with a wide variety of breakfasts, great sandwiches (including the raid-the-pantry DIY option), and Thai and Western (including Mexican) main courses, washed down with a big choice of drinks and cocktails; on Sunday evenings there's a traditional English roast dinner and a live band. Three doors away, behind a travel agent that has second-hand books for sale and Internet access, stands friendly *Haad Chao Phao Resort* (Ⓣ077 349273, Ⓔpermanachart@yahoo.com; ②): in a small shady garden, the simple but clean and well-kept en-suite bungalows (all with mosquito nets and verandas) lead down to an attractive patch of beach.

Hat Son and Hat Yao

North of Chaophao, *Haad Son Resort* (Ⓣ077 349104, Ⓦwww.haadson.com; fan ④, air-con ⑥) has the small, sandy beach of **HAT SON** to itself. They're spaciously laid out among pretty flowers on a terraced hillside, and vary from the simple (though fan-cooled and en suite), to the deluxe (air-con, hot water and mini-bar).

△ Hat Yao, Ko Pha Ngan.

This popular, family-oriented place also has a very attractive swimming pool with a separate children's pool, Internet access and kayaks for rent.

Beyond the next headland, the long, attractive, gently curved beach of **HAT YAO** is gradually and justifiably becoming livelier and more popular, with several stand-alone bars and restaurants, diving outfits, supermarkets, a bank currency-exchange booth, an ATM and jeep and bike rental. Among a nonstop line of bungalows here, good budget bets are *Ibiza* (Ⓣ077 349121, Ⓦwww.ibizabungalows.com; fan ①, air-con ⑥), a lively, central spot in a spacious garden with airy bungalows that run the full gamut, whether you're happy to share a bathroom or want air-con and hot water, as well as Internet access and kayaks for rent; and the friendly *Bay View* (Ⓣ077 374148; ③), which offers good food and views from a variety of en-suite bungalows on the quiet northern headland. Hat Yao's plushest spot is *Long Bay Resort*, with a long stretch of beach and spacious gardens towards the north end of the bay (Ⓣ077 349057–9, Ⓦwww.geocities.com/lbresort; fan ⑤, air-con ⑦). Choose between small but smart fan bungalows with cold showers, and large, air-con cottages with hot water, fridge and TV. There's an attractive swimming pool and kayaks to rent, and you can book a **boat-trip** on the longtail *Luna Sea*, taking in Ao Mae Hat, Hat Khuat, Ao Thong Nai Pan and Thaan Sadet.

Hat Salad and Ao Mae Hat

To the north of Hat Yao, **HAT SALAD** is another pretty bay, sheltered and sandy, with good snorkelling off the northern tip. On the access road behind the beach is a rather untidy service village of shops, travel agents, bike and jeep rental outlets and Internet offices. Among the dozen or so bungalow outfits, the laid-back and well-run old-timer, *Salad Hut*, stands out (Ⓣ077 349246, Ⓦwww.saladhut.com; ③–⑥). Arrayed along the beachfront in a shady, colourful garden are bamboo bungalows with cold showers, and large, airy, wooden affairs with hot water; all come with fans, big verandas, hammocks and mosquito nets. The owners have plans to upgrade, including possibly a swimming pool, so rates may go up.

On the island's northwest corner, **AO MAE HAT** is good for swimming and snorkelling among the coral that lines the sand causeway to the tiny islet of Ko Maa. The bay supports several bungalow resorts, notably the popular, friendly *Wang Sai Resort* at its south end (Ⓣ077 374238; fan ②, air-con ⑥). On a huge plot of land, most of the en-suite bungalows are set back from the beach – the best of them are up the slope behind, with great sunset views.

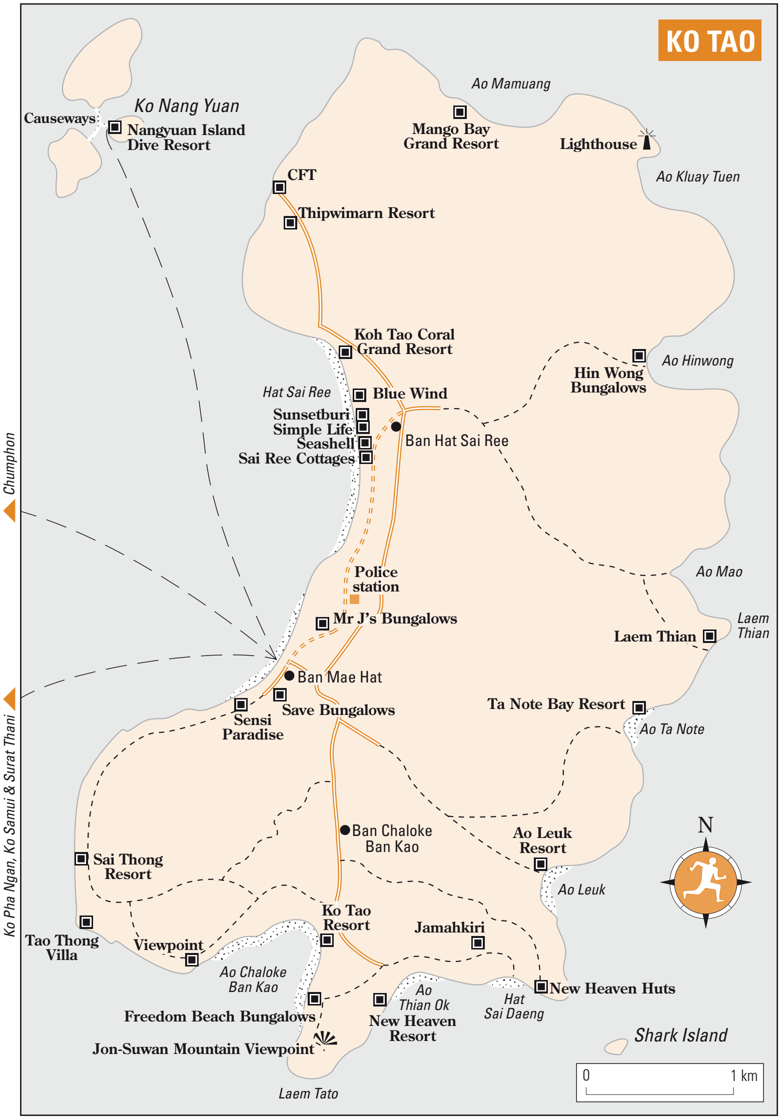
Ko Tao

KO TAO (Turtle Island) is so named because its outline resembles a turtle nose-diving towards Ko Pha Ngan, 40km to the south. The rugged shell of the turtle, to the east, is crenellated with secluded coves where one or two bungalows hide among the rocks. On the western side, the turtle's underbelly is a long curve of classic beach, **Hat Sai Ree**, facing **Ko Nang Yuan**, a beautiful Y-shaped group of islands offshore, also known as Ko Hang Tao (Turtle's Tail Island). The 21 square kilometres of granite in between is topped by dense forest on the higher slopes and dotted with huge boulders that look as if they await some Easter Island sculptor. It's fun to spend a couple of days exploring the network of rough trails, after which you'll probably know all 1100 of the island's inhabitants. Ko Tao is now best known as a venue for **scuba-diving**, with a wide variety of dive sites in close proximity; see the box on p.332 for further details. The island is also a good spot for bouldering: Zen Gecko runs **rock-climbing** courses, starting at B800 for half a day (make contact on Ⓔzengecko5@hotmail.com; Ⓦwww.zengecko.com).

The island is the last and most remote of the archipelago that continues the line of Surat Thani's mountains into the sea. There were around 120 sets of **bungalows** at the latest count (still sometimes not enough during the peak season from December to March, when travellers occasionally have to sleep on the beach until a hut becomes free) concentrated along the west and south sides. Some still provide the bare minimum, with plain mattresses for beds, mosquito nets and shared bathrooms, but nearly all places can now offer en-suite bathrooms and a few comforts, and there are a growing number of upmarket resorts around with such luxuries as air-con, hot water and swimming pools. There's a limited government supply of electricity, so much of it still comes from private generators, and it's usually evenings only, with few places providing 24-hour service. Ko Tao suffers from a scarcity of water, especially during the hot season, so visitors are asked to conserve water whenever possible.

If you're just arriving and want to stay on one of the less accessible beaches, it might be a good idea to go with one of the touts who meet the ferries at Mae Hat, with pick-up or boat on hand, since at least you'll know their bungalows aren't full, which is possible from December to March; otherwise call ahead, as even the remotest bungalows now have land lines or mobile phones. Some resorts with attached scuba-diving operations have been known to refuse guests who don't sign up for diving trips or courses; on the other hand, many of the dive companies now have their own lodgings, available at a discounted price to divers. With a year-round customer base of divers – and resident dive instructors – more and more sophisticated Western **restaurants** and **bars** are springing up all the time, notably in Mae Hat and on Hat Sai Ree.

The **weather** is much the same as on Pha Ngan and Samui, but being that bit further off the mainland, Ko Tao feels the effect of the southwest monsoon more: June to October can have strong winds and rain, with a lot of debris blown onto


KO TAO
Ko Nang Yuan
Causeways
Nangyuan Island Dive Resort
Ao Mamuang
Mango Bay Grand Resort
Lighthouse
Ao Kluay Tuen
CFT
Thipwimarn Resort
Koh Tao Coral Grand Resort
Hin Wong Bungalows
Ao Hinwong
Hat Sai Ree
Blue Wind
Sunsetburi
Simple Life
Seashell
Sai Ree Cottages
Ban Hat Sai Ree
Chumphon
Police station
Ao Mao
Mr J's Bungalows
Laem Thian
Laem Thian
Ban Mae Hat
Ko Pha Ngan, Ko Samui & Surat Thani
Sensi Paradise
Save Bungalows
Ta Note Bay Resort
Ao Ta Note
Ban Chaloke Ban Kao
Ao Leuk Resort
N
Sai Thong Resort
Ao Leuk
Ko Tao Resort
Jamahkiri
Tao Thong Villa
Viewpoint
Ao Chaloke Ban Kao
New Heaven Huts
Freedom Beach Bungalows
Ao Thian Ok
Hat Sai Daeng
New Heaven Resort
Jon-Suwan Mountain Viewpoint
Shark Island
0
1 km
Laem Tato

the windward coasts. There isn't a TAT office on Ko Tao, but the regularly updated and widely available free booklet, *Koh Tao Info*, is a useful source of **information**, along with its associated **website**, Ⓦ www.kohtao-online.com, which allows online accommodation booking. If you're going to be exploring, well worth picking up from supermarkets on Ko Tao or Ko Pha Ngan is Visid Hongsombud's excellent, annually updated **map** of Ko Pha Ngan and Ko Tao (B100).

Scuba-diving off Ko Tao

Some of the best **dive sites** in Thailand are found off Ko Tao, which is blessed with outstandingly clear (visibility up to 35m) and deep water close in to shore. On top of that, there's a kaleidoscopic array of coral species and other marine life, and you may be lucky enough to encounter whale sharks, barracudas, leatherback turtles and pilot whales. Diving is possible at any time of the year, with sheltered sites on one or other side of the island in any season – the changeover from southwest to northeast monsoon in November is the worst time, while visibility is best from April to July, in September (usually best of all) and October. Ko Tao now supports a small, one-person recompression chamber, evacuation centre and general diving medicine centre at Badalveda in Mae Hat (ⓣ077 456664 or 086 272 4618, ⓦwww.badalveda.com), and there's a bigger chamber on Ko Samui, only ninety minutes away by speedboat (see p.297).

To meet demand, Ko Tao has about fifty **dive companies**, making this the largest dive-training centre in Southeast Asia; most of them are staffed by Westerners and based at Mae Hat, Hat Sai Ree or Ao Chaloke Ban Kao. Twenty or so of the more reputable companies have organized themselves into the **Koh Tao Dive Operators Club** (DOC), to maintain standards and to undertake important environmental initiatives. Be sure to dive with a member of the DOC – they have an office in Mae Hat just north of the main pier and a website, ⓦwww.kohtaodoc.com, with a list of members. Beyond that, when choosing a company, talk to other travellers about their experiences and check out the kind of instruction, the size of group on each course, and whether you get on with the instructors. Companies generally offer discounted accommodation for the duration of an Openwater course, but ask exactly how long it's for (3 or 4 nights), where it is and what it's like. Among members of the DOC, PADI Five-Star (or higher) Dive Centres, all of which are committed to looking after the environment and maintaining high standards of service, include: *Ban's Diving Resort* on Hat Sai Ree ⓣ077 456446, ⓦwww.amazingkohtao.com; Big Fish at Ao Chaloke Ban Kao ⓣ077 456290, ⓦwww.bigfishresort.com; Black Tip at Ao Ta Note ⓣ077 456488 and Mae Hat ⓣ077 456204, ⓦwww.blacktipdiving.com; Coral Grand Divers (ⓦwww.coralgranddivers.com) at the *Koh Tao Coral Grand Resort* on Hat Sai Ree (see p.337); *Ko Tao Resort* on Ao Chaloke Ban Kao (see p.340); Planet Scuba at Mae Hat ⓣ077 456110, ⓦwww.planet-scuba.net; and Scuba Junction on Hat Sai Ree ⓣ077 456164, ⓦwww.scuba-junction.com.

By far the most popular **course**, PADI's four-day "Openwater" for beginners costs a minimum of B9000 with a member of the Dive Operators' Club. One-day introductions to diving are also available for a minimum of B2000, as is the full menu of PADI courses, up to "Instructor". Discounted accommodation during courses is also usually offered, costing from B200 for a fan room per night, from B500 for an air-con room, with a DOC member.

For **qualified divers**, one dive typically costs B1000, a ten-dive package B7000, with fifteen percent discounts if you bring your own gear. Among the more unusual offerings available are luxury live-aboards with Coral Grand Divers (ⓦwww.coralgranddivers.com) at the *Koh Tao Coral Grand Resort* (see p.337), and three-day trips to Ang Thong National Marine Park through Koh Tao Divers at Ban Hat Sai Ree (ⓣ086 069 9244, ⓦwww.kohtaodivers.com). *Ban's Diving Resort* (see above)

Getting to Ko Tao

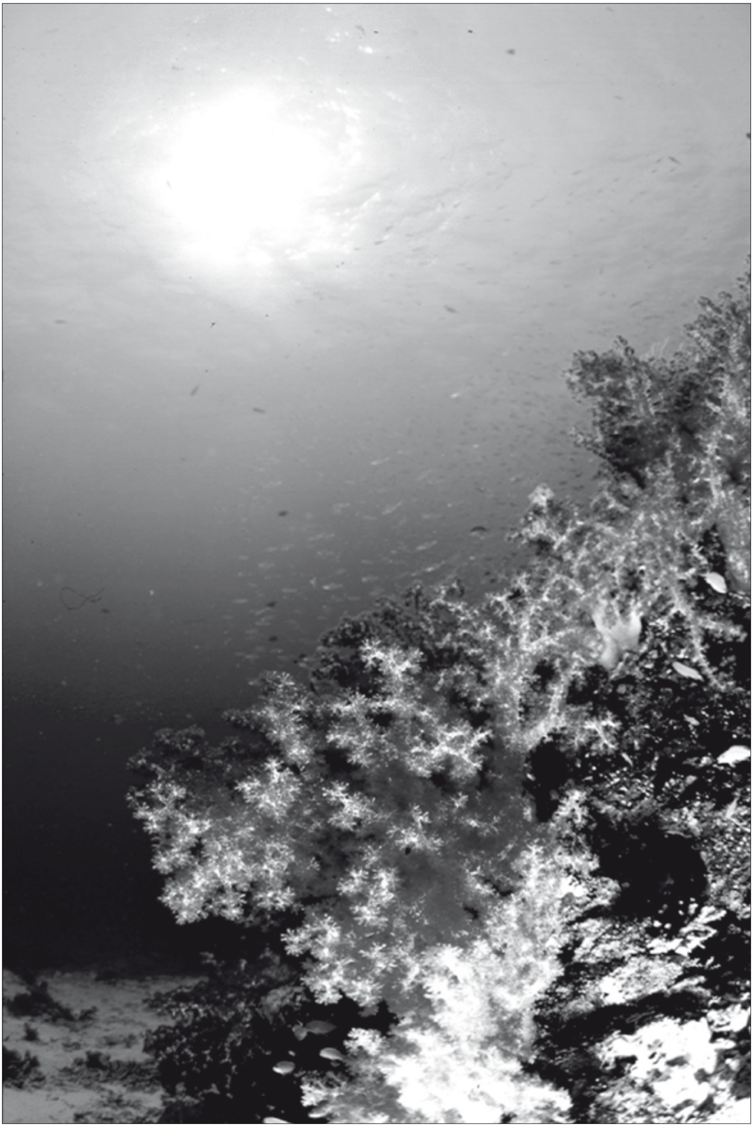
For details of the night boat and morning boats **from Chumphon**, which is connected to Bangkok by train and bus, see p.289. Among the Chumphon–Ko Tao boat companies, Lomprayah (on Ko Tao ⓣ077 456176; ⓦwww.lomprayah.com), for example, organizes VIP bus and boat packages for B850 from Thanon Khao San in **Bangkok** (ⓣ02 629 2569–70), via **Hua Hin** (ⓣ032 533738–9).

maintains a speciality in underwater photography. Some of the companies will take **snorkellers** along on their dive trips; Dive Point, based between the piers in Mae Hat (Ⓣ077 456231, Ⓦwww.divepoint-kohtao.com), for example, charge B500 for a long afternoon (B400 if you bring your own snorkelling equipment).

Main dive sites

- **Ko Nang Yuan** Surrounded by a variety of sites, with assorted hard and soft corals and an abundance of fish, which between them cater for just about everyone: the **Nang Yuan Pinnacle**, a granite pinnacle with boulder swim-throughs, morays and reef sharks; **Green Rock**, a maze of boulder swim-throughs, caves and canyons, featuring stingrays and occasional reef sharks; **Twins**, two rock formations covered in corals and sponges, with a colourful coral garden as a backdrop; and the **Japanese Gardens**, on the east side of the sand causeway, which get their name from the hundreds of hard and soft coral formations here and are good for beginners and popular among snorkellers.
- **White Rock (Hin Khao)** Between Hat Sai Ree and Ko Nang Yuan, where sarcophyton leather coral turns the granite boulders white when seen from the surface; also wire, antipatharian and colourful soft corals, and gorgonian sea fans. Plenty of fish, including titan triggerfish, butterfly fish, angelfish, clown fish and morays.
- **Shark Island** Large granite boulders with acropora, wire and bushy antipatharian corals, sea whips, gorgonian sea fans and barrel sponges. Reef fish include angelfish, triggerfish and barracuda; there's a resident turtle, and leopard and reef sharks may be found as well as occasional whale sharks.
- **Hinwong Pinnacle** At Ao Hinwong; generally for experienced divers, often with strong currents. Similar scenery to White Rock, over a larger area, with beautiful soft coral at 30m depth. A wide range of fish, including blue-spotted fantail stingrays, sweetlips pufferfish and boxfish, as well as hawksbill turtles.
- **Chumphon** or **Northwest Pinnacle** A granite pinnacle for experienced divers, starting 14m underwater and dropping off to over 36m, its top covered in anemones; surrounded by several smaller formations and offering the possibility of exceptional visibility. Barrel sponges, tree and antipatharian corals at deeper levels; a wide variety of fish, in large numbers, attract local fishermen; barracudas, batfish, whale sharks (seasonal) and huge groupers.
- **Southwest Pinnacle** One of the top sites in terms of visibility, scenery and marine life for experienced divers. A huge pyramid-like pinnacle rising to 6m below the surface, its upper part covered in anemones, with smaller pinnacles around; at lower levels, granite boulders, barrel sponges, sea whips, bushy antipatharian and tree corals. Big groupers, snappers and barracudas; occasionally, large rays, leopard and sand sharks, swordfish, finback whales and whale sharks.
- **Sail Rock (Hin Bai)** Midway between Ko Tao and Ko Pha Ngan, emerging from the sand at a depth of 40m and rising 15m above the sea's surface. Visibility of up to 30m, and an amazing ten-metre underwater chimney (vertical swim-through). Antipatharian corals, both bushes and whips, and carpets of anemones. Large groupers, snappers and fusiliers, blue-ringed angelfish, batfish, kingfish and juvenile clown sweetlips; a likely spot for sighting whale sharks and mantas.

Four companies currently operate daily scheduled boats between Thong Sala on **Ko Pha Ngan** and Ko Tao. Songserm (on Ko Tao Ⓣ077 456274) and Phangan Cruises (on Ko Tao Ⓣ077 456012 or 089 871 2939) do the voyage in 1hr 30min (both 1 daily; B250). Lomprayah (see above) and Seatran (on Ko Tao Ⓣ077 456263–4) cover the ground in an hour (both 2 daily; B350) – though in heavier seas, all four companies' boats take about the same time. The Lomprayah catama-



△ Diving off Ko Tao

ran originates at Maenam, Seatran at Bangrak on **Ko Samui** (total journey time to Ko Tao on either 1hr 30min; B550), while Phangan Cruises originate at Bangrak and the Songserm Express Boat docks at Na Thon (journey time to Ko Tao on either 2hr-plus; B350). This Songserm boat originates at **Surat Thani** (5hr-plus to Ko Tao; B500); there's also a night boat from Surat Thani, departing at 11pm (Ⓣ077 284928 or 081 326 8973; 9hr; B500).

These services fluctuate according to demand, and in high season extra boats may appear. Voyages to and from Ko Tao may also be at the mercy of the weather at any time between June and January. Boat ticket prices fluctuate, too – for example, with so much competition between operators and routes, you'll currently find that leaving the island is a lot cheaper than the prices quoted above for getting there.

Island transport

You can **get around** easily enough on foot, but there are roads of sorts now to most of the resorts, though many are still very rough tracks, suitable for four-wheel drive only; motorbike **taxis** and pick-ups (roughly B50–100/person, more late at night, and more for a 4WD to somewhere more remote) are available in Mae Hat. There are also **rental** mopeds (B100–150/day), ATVs (all-terrain vehicles or quad bikes; B450/day) and even a few jeeps (B1000/day). As on Ko Phangan, however, there have been lots of reports of travellers being charged exorbitant amounts if they bring the vehicle back with even the most minor damage – for motorbikes, avoid the outfits in front of the main pier in Mae Hat, and rent from your bungalow or someone reliable like Mr J (see below).

Longtail-boat taxis are available at Mae Hat or through your bungalow, or you could splash out on your own **round-island boat tour**, allowing you to explore the coastline fully, with stops for snorkelling and swimming (about B1500 for the boat for the day, depending on the number of passengers); alternatively you could hook up with a group tour, again through your resort or at Mae Hat (usually about B500/head). The *Mango Bay Resort* office in Mae Hat (see p.338) organizes occasional **speed-boat trips** to Ang Thong National Marine Park for the day (B3200/person).

Mae Hat and around

All boats to Ko Tao dock at **MAE HAT**, a small, lively village in a pleasant, beach-front setting, which boasts the lion's share of the island's amenities, including a few supermarkets, pharmacies and clinics. A paved high street heads straight up the hill from the main pier (eventually ending up in Ao Chaloke Ban Kao), with narrower front streets running at right angles, parallel to the seafront. The Lomprayah and Songserm boats each have their own pier, to the south of the main one.

Accommodation

If you just want functional, reliable, good-value **accommodation**, head for either *Save Bungalows*, next to Mr J's supermarket just south of the piers (ⓣ077 456656; fan ②, air-con ⑤), or *Mr J's Bungalows*, behind Mr J's other supermarket, five minutes' walk north of the village (ⓣ077 456066–7; fan ②, air-con ⑤). They're both part of Mr J's trusty network of businesses (see p.336), and offer large, clean, mostly en-suite rooms.

For somewhere more characterful to stay near Mae Hat, head for the charming, well-run ★ *Sensi Paradise Resort* (ⓣ077 456244, ⓦwww.kohtaoparadise.com; ⑥–⑨), whose pretty, flower-covered grounds sprawl over the lower slopes of the headland just to the south of the village. It offers a pretty beachside restaurant and some of the best upmarket accommodation on the island, in well-designed wooden cottages and villas with en-suite cold-water bathrooms and mini-bars, some with air-con and some with large terraces and open-air bathrooms.

A good way further down the coast (40min walk from Mae Hat or around B100 in a taxi-boat) is *Sai Thong Resort*, whose shady grounds spread between its own, private Sai Nual beach and the next small bay to the south (ⓣ077 456476, ⓦwww.sai-thong.com; ①–⑥). Efficiently run and popular with families, it provides a wide variety of bungalows (some with shared bathrooms), which have few frills but are decently maintained. There's a small, basic spa with a seawater pool, and kayaks and snorkels are available.

About ten minutes' walk further south again, *Tao Thong Villa* (☎077 456224; ①–⑤) offers plenty of shady seclusion and good snorkelling and swimming. Accommodation, ranging from very cheap huts with no electricity and shared bathrooms to sturdy, en-suite bungalows with fans and fridges, are dotted around a rocky outcrop and the slope behind, with a breezy restaurant on the small, sandy isthmus in between.

Eating and drinking

Not surprisingly, Mae Hat boasts the pick of the island's **eating and drinking** options. French-run *Cappuccino*, 100m from the pier up the high street, does a mean *pain au chocolat* and coffee, plus gourmet sandwiches and salads. Further up the street, *La Matta* turns out delicious pizzas in scores of varieties, tasty home-made pastas, and a few Italian meat and fish dishes and desserts, as well as espresso coffees and home-made *limoncello*. Off the north side of the high street near the pier, on what's sometimes known as Mae Hat Square, *Café del Sol* probably has the biggest choice of expensive Western goodies on the island – this is the place to come if you fancy breadcrumbed fish'n'chips or beef carpaccio with parmesan.

Whitening, a congenial and chic bar, restaurant and club 200m south of the main pier down the front street, has a great deck and relaxing beach tables overlooking the bay. It dishes up some very tasty and creative Thai and Western food, as well as mean cocktails, and is famous for its Friday night parties. Other popular bars include *Dragon Bar*, a stylish place on the high street, painted ochre and decorated with elegant bamboo fronds, with regular DJ sessions; and *Dirty Nelly's*, an Irish-managed pub near the pier on Mae Hat Square, which has decent Guinness on tap, a pool table and big-screen sports.

Listings

Banks Mae Hat now supports several banks, including Siam City Bank, up the high street on the left, with an ATM and Western Union facilities; and at the crossroads hard by the pier, a Krung Thai Bank currency-exchange booth, with an ATM on the corner opposite.

Books B-Books up the high street on the right sells second-hand and new books and international newspapers.

Internet access Prasit Service, up the high street on the left, has a good reputation both as a travel agent and for Internet access.

Police station Five minutes' walk north of Mat Hat, on the narrow paved road towards Hat Sai Ree (☎077 456631).

Post office At the top of the village (turn left), near the start of the paved road to Ban Hat Sai Ree, with ATM, phone and poste-restante facilities.

Supermarket and travel agency Five minutes' walk north of Mae Hat, at the top of a small rise opposite the primary school, you'll find the head office of Ko Tao's all-purpose fixer, and all-round character, Mr J. Here – and at Mr J's other two shops, south of the piers in Mae Hat (Save Shop) and at Ao Chaloke Ban Kao (Mr D's) – you can rent motorbikes, organize a visa extension, exchange several currencies, recycle batteries, buy and sell second-hand books, even borrow money.

Watersports MV Watersports (☎077 456065 or 087 264 2633), south of the piers on the front street at *Kallaphanga Resort*, is one of several places on the island that rents kayaks (two-person B150/hr, B800/day), as well as offering sailing rental and tuition, windsurfer rental, wakeboarding and water-skiing.

Hat Sai Ree and Ko Nang Yuan

To the north of Mae Hat, beyond a small promontory, you'll find **Hat Sai Ree**, Ko Tao's only long beach. The strip of white sand stretches for 2km in a gentle curve, backed by a smattering of coconut palms and around twenty bungalow resorts. A narrow paved track runs along the back of the beach to the village of Ban Hat Sai Ree, parallelled by the main road further inland. Opposite the Bank of Ayudhya and its ATM at the south end of Hat Sai Ree, *Pure Lounge* is a stylish beach **bar**, with regular party nights, striking crimson beanbag seats and tables to recline at on the sand framed by dramatic boulders.

Towards the midpoint of the beach, twenty minutes' walk from Mae Hat, *Sai Ree Cottages* (ⓣ077 456126; ②–③) has primitive huts and sturdy **bungalows**, all en suite and well maintained, in a large, beautiful, flower-strewn garden, and serves excellent grub. The spacious, tidy compound next door belongs to *Seashell Resort* (ⓣ077 456271, ⓦwww.kohtaoseashell.com; fan ④, air-con ⑦), a friendly, well-run place, with a DOC dive school; it offers traditional massage, as well as very smart, sturdy bungalows, with en-suite cold showers and mosquito screens, either with fans or with air-con, fridge and TV. A hundred metres or so further up the beach, *Simple Life* (ⓣ077 456142, ⓦwww.simplelifedivers.com; ④) is another good choice with a DOC dive school, offering comfortable, en-suite, fan-cooled bungalows, great food and a lively beach bar. On a narrow but tree-lined strip of land next door is the upmarket *Sunsetburi Resort* (ⓣ077 456266, ⓕ077 456101, fan ⑤, air-con ⑥–⑧), with its own large swimming pool and modern, concrete cottages, many with air-con and some with the luxury of hot water. *Blue Wind* (ⓣ077 456116, ⓔbluewindwadear@hotmail.com; fan ②, air-con ⑥), next door but one, offers a variety of smart, well-kept, en-suite rooms and bungalows, many with hot water and some with air-con and TV, scattered about a shady compound. The very good beachside restaurant serves up home-made breads, croissants, cakes and espresso coffee, as well as Indian and Thai food, home-made pasta and other Western meals; yoga courses (ⓔshambhalayogaa@yahoo.co.nz) are also held here.

Around and inland from *Simple Life* and *Sunsetburi* spreads **BAN HAT SAI REE**, a burgeoning village of supermarkets, clinics, pharmacies, travel agents, Internet outlets, a branch of Siam City Bank with an ATM and Western Union facilities, **restaurants** and **bars**. On the south side of the village, the stylish *New Heaven Deli & Bakery* serves up great, home-baked breads and cakes, as well as sandwiches, pies, salads, shakes and booster juices. Nearby on the beach, *Suthep* is an expat favourite, serving all kinds of Western food, including pasta, pizza and a very good vegetarian selection, as well as tasty Thai food. The beach tables at the adjacent *Dry Bar* are a great spot to chill over a sundowner and come alive for a Friday night beach party. Inland, there's a branch of B-Books (see opposite) in Sairee Plaza on the main road from Mae Hat, while at the east end of the village, on the road towards Ao Hinwong, is Monsoon **gym** (ⓣ086 271 2212, ⓦwww.monsoongym.com), which offers *muay thai* classes.

The main paved road continues **north of the village** past a luxury beachfront development, the welcoming *Koh Tao Coral Grand Resort* (ⓣ077 456431–4, ⓦwww.kohtaocoral.com; ⑧). Sandstone-pink octagonal cottages with hardwood floors and large, attractive bathrooms gather – some a little tightly – around a pretty, Y-shaped pool; all have hot water, TV and air-con. North again beyond the end of Hat Sai Ree, another upscale spot, *Thipwimarn Resort* (ⓣ077 456409, ⓦwww.thipwimarnresort.com; fan ⑦, air-con ⑧), tumbles down a steep slope, past an elevated, infinity-edge swimming pool, to its own small beach. Dotted around the hillside, smart, thatched, whitewashed villas, most with hot water and mini-bar, enjoy a fair measure of seclusion, satellite TV and fine sunset views. The road ends at isolated *CFT* (ⓣ077 456730; ①–⑤) on the rocky northwest flank of the island, which offers cheap shacks or en-suite bungalows, and excellent food; there's no beach here, but you can swim off the rocks and the views over to Ko Nang Yuan are something else. Based at *CFT* is Here and Now (Ⓦwww.hereandnow.be), a respected centre for traditional massages, as well as t'ai chi/chi gong courses.

Ko Nang Yuan

One kilometre off the northwest of Ko Tao, **KO NANG YUAN**, a close-knit group of three tiny islands, provides the most spectacular beach scenery in these parts, thanks to the causeway of fine white sand that joins up the islands. You can easily swim off the east side of the causeway to snorkel over the Japanese Gardens, which feature hundreds of hard and soft coral formations. Boats from the Lomprayah pier in Mae Hat, just south of the main pier, run back and forth three times a day (B100 return), but note that rules to protect the environment here include banning visitors from bringing cans, plastic bottles and fins with them, and day-trippers are charged B100 to land on the island; alternatively, it's B300 for an all-in day-trip, including boat transfers, lunch and snorkelling. Transfers from and to Mae Hat are free for people staying at the *Nangyuan Island Dive Resort* (Ⓣ077 456088–93, Ⓦwww.nangyuan.com; fan ⑥, air-con ⑦), which makes the most of its beautiful location, its pricey fan and air-con bungalows, with en-suite bathrooms and fridges, spreading over all three islands.

The north and east coasts

The lone bay on the north coast, **Ao Mamuang** (Mango Bay), is a beautiful, tree-clad bowl, whose shallow reef is a popular stop on snorkelling day-trips. There's little in the way of a beach here, but the well-appointed, new wooden bungalows and attractive bar-restaurant of *Mango Bay Grand Resort* perch on stilts on the rocks (Ⓣ077 456097 or 087 893 6998, Ⓦwww.mangobaygrandresortkohtaothailand.com; office in Mae Hat just south of the main pier; fan ⑥, air-con ⑧).

The sheltered inlets of the east coast, most of them containing one or two sets of bungalows, can be reached by boat, pick-up or four-wheel-drive. The most northerly inhabitation here is at **Ao Hinwong**, a deeply recessed bay strewn with large boulders and coral reefs, which has a particularly remote, almost desolate air. Nevertheless, *Hin Wong Bungalows* (Ⓣ077 456006 or 081 229 4810; ②–⑤) is welcoming and provides good, en-suite accommodation on a steep, grassy slope above the rocks, either in small, older bungalows or attractive, new, wooden affairs with large bathrooms. In the middle of the coast, the dramatic tiered promontory of **Laem Thian** shelters a tiny beach and a colourful reef on its south side. With the headland to itself, *Laem Thian* (Ⓣ077 456477 or 081 083 5186, Ⓔpingpong_laemthian@hotmail.com; fan ③, air-con ⑥) offers comfy bungalows and cheaper hotel-style rooms, decent food and a secluded, castaway feel.

Laem Thian's coral reef stretches down towards **Ao Ta Note**, a horseshoe inlet sprinkled with boulders and plenty of coarse sand, with excellent snorkelling just north of the bay's mouth. The pick of the half-dozen resorts here is *Ta Note Bay Dive Resort* (Ⓣ077 456757–8, Ⓔtanotebay@hotmail.com; fan ④, air-con ⑦), with well-designed, en-suite wooden bungalows, set among thick bougainvillea, some enjoying large verandas and views out towards Ko Pha Ngan and Ko Samui. Snorkelling equipment is available at the resort, while the *Black Tip Dive Resort* (Ⓣ077 456488, Ⓦwww.blacktipdiving.com) offers kayaking, waterskiing and wakeboarding. The last bay carved out of the turtle's shell, **Ao Leuk**, has a well-recessed beach and is serviced by the en-suite bungalows at *Ao Leuk Resort* (Ⓣ077 456692; ②), which enjoy plenty of space and shade, either in the palm grove behind the beach or up the hill to the south. The water is deep enough for good swimming and snorkelling, featuring hard and soft coral gardens.

The south coast

The southeast corner of the island sticks out in a long, thin mole of land, which points towards Shark Island, a colourful diving and snorkelling site just offshore; the headland shelters the sandy beach of **Hat Sai Daeng** on one side if the wind's coming from the northeast, or the rocky cove on the other side if it's blowing from the southwest. Straddling the headland is *New Heaven Huts* (ⓣ087 933 1329, ⓔnewheavenhut@yahoo.com; ③), a laid-back, well-equipped place with a good kitchen, whose pleasantly idiosyncratic en-suite bungalows enjoy plenty of elbow room and good views. Overlooking **Ao Thian Ok**, the next bay along on the **south coast**, is the same family's *New Heaven Resort*, a scenic restaurant with attractive bungalows and an affiliated, DOC dive school in Ao Chaloke Ban Kao (ⓣ077 456462, ⓦwww.newheavenresort.com). On a beautiful deck perched high on the eastern flank of the Laem Tato headland, classic Thai dishes, including seafood specialities, are dished up in the evening, simpler fare at lunch time, and yoga classes are held in the morning; the bungalows (⑥–⑧), on a tree-covered slope running down to a private sandy beach, feature large, cold-water bathrooms and verandas with great views, and include family and air-con rooms. The remote hills between Hat Sai Daeng and Ao Thian Ok provide the spectacular location for a luxurious **spa resort**, *Jamahkiri* (call ⓣ077 456400–1 for reservation and pick-up; free hourly shuttle from their Mae Hat office, next to *Café del Sol* on Mae Hat Square; ⓦwww.jamahkiri.com), which offers saunas, body wraps, facials and massages. There's also a panoramic bar-restaurant and opulent, secluded rooms, a chic mix of Thai and Western design, with red silk furnishings, sunken Jacuzzi baths, air-con, LCD satellite TVs and mini-bars (⑨); a swimming pool and fitness centre are planned.

The deep indent of **Ao Chaloke Ban Kao** is protected from the worst of both monsoons, and consequently has seen a fair amount of development, with several dive resorts taking advantage of the large, sheltered, shallow bay. Behind the beach

△ Laem Tato, Ko Tao

are clinics, ATMs, bike rental shops, stand-alone bars and restaurants, and a branch of Mr J's supermarket and travel agency (see p.336), Mr D's.

Three accommodation options stand out from the crowd here. Run by a friendly bunch, *Viewpoint Bungalows* (Ⓣ077 456666 or 077 456777, Ⓦwww.kohtaoviewpoint.com; ⑤) sprawl along the western side of the bay and around the headland beyond, with great sunset views; architect-designed in chic Balinese style, they boast rock bathrooms, mosquito nets and attractive verandas. *Ko Tao Resort* (Ⓣ077 456133–4, Ⓦwww.kotaoresort.com; fan ⑦, air-con ⑦–⑨) makes a fair stab at institutionalized luxury and is worth a splurge, especially if you're considering scuba-diving with its diving school. The cottages and rooms, which have verandas and plain, smart decor (all with TV, some with air-con, hot water, sea views and mini-bars), are ranged around a decent-sized pool and restaurant by the beach, or up the hillside above.

On the east side of the bay, *Freedom Beach Bungalows* (Ⓣ077 456596; fan ③, air-con ⑦) offers a mix of old-style, blue-painted, en-suite huts with sturdy corrugated roofs and small verandas, and smart, new bungalows with air-con and hot water; they dot a spacious slope that leads down to the idyllic white sand of Freedom Beach, a secluded palm-lined spot carved out of the **Laem Tato** headland. Rough signposts will lead you beyond the bungalows for a fifteen-minute walk, the last stretch up a steep hillside to **Jon-Suwan Mountain Viewpoint**, which affords fantastic views, especially at sunset, over the neighbouring bays of Chaloke Ban Kao and Thian Ok and across to Ko Pha Ngan and Ko Samui.

Nakhon Si Thammarat and around

NAKHON SI THAMMARAT, the south's second-largest town, occupies a blind spot in the eyes of most tourists, whose focus is fixed on Ko Samui, 100km to the north. Nakhon's neglect is unfortunate, for it's an absorbing place: the south's major pilgrimage site and home to a huge military base, it's relaxed, self-confident and sophisticated, well known for its excellent cuisine and traditional handicrafts. The shops on Thanon Thachang are especially good for local nielloware (*kruang tom*), household items and jewellery, elegantly patterned in gold or silver often on black, and *yan lipao*, sturdy basketware made from intricately woven fern stems of different colours. Nakhon is also the best place in the country to see how Thai shadow plays work, at Suchart Subsin's workshop.

The town is recorded under the name of Ligor (or Lakhon), the capital of the kingdom of Lankasuka, as early as the second century, and classical dance-drama, *lakhon*, is supposed to have been developed here. Well placed for trade with China and southern India (via an overland route from the port of Trang, on the Andaman Sea), Nakhon was the point through which the Theravada form of Buddhism was imported from Sri Lanka and spread to Sukhothai, the capital of the new Thai state, in the thirteenth century.

Known as *muang phra*, the "city of monks", Nakhon is still the religious capital of the south, and the main centre for **festivals**. The most important of these are the **Tamboon Deuan Sip**, held during the waning of the moon in the tenth lunar month (either September or October), and the **Hae Pha Khun That**, which is held several times a year, but most importantly on Maha Puja (February full moon – see also p.55) and on Visakha Puja (May full moon – see p.55). The purpose of the former is to pay homage to dead relatives and friends; it is believed that during this fifteen-day period all *pret* – ancestors who have been damned to hell – are allowed out to visit the world, and so their relatives perform a merit-making ceremony in the temples, presenting offerings from the first harvest to ease their suffering. A huge ten-day fair takes place at Sanam Na Muang at this time, as well as processions, shadow plays and other theatrical performances. The Hae Pha Khun That also attracts people from all over the south, to pay homage to the relics of the Buddha at Wat Mahathat. The centrepiece of this ceremony is the Pha Phra Bot, a strip of yellow cloth many hundreds of metres long, which is carried in a spectacular procession around the chedi.

Arrival, information and accommodation

Nakhon's **bus terminal** and **train station** are both fairly centrally placed, though the **airport**, served daily by PB Air (at the airport, Ⓣ075 313030) and Nok Air (Ⓣ1318 or 02 900 9955), is way out to the northwest of the city off the Surat Thani road; air-con minibuses meet arriving flights to ferry passengers to the centre of town. **Share-taxis** congregate towards the south end of Thanon Yomarat, while **air-con minibus** offices around town include one for Sichon, Surat Thani and Ko Samui (via the Don Sak ferry) at the top of Thanon Chamroenwithi, and those for Trang and Hat Yai on Thanon Boh-Ang. On arrival, both share-taxis and air-con minibuses should drop you off right at your destination. For getting around Nakhon, small blue **share-songthaews** ply up and down Thanon Ratchadamnoen for B8 a ride.

TAT has an office in a restored 1920s government officers' club on Sanam Na Muang (daily 8.30am–4.30pm; Ⓣ075 346515–6, Ⓔtatnksri@tat.or.th), which also covers the provinces of Trang and Phatthalung. The main **post office** (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm, Sat & Sun 8.30am–noon) is nearby on Thanon Ratchadamnoen, opposite the police station, and has international phones upstairs. Klickzone in Bovorn Bazaar on Thanon Ratchadamnoen is a good place to access the **Internet**.

Accommodation

Nakhon has no guest houses or traveller-oriented **accommodation**, but the best of its hotels offer very good value in all price ranges.

Bue Loung Hotel 1487/19 Soi Luang Muang, Thanon Chamroenwithi Ⓣ075 341518, Ⓕ075 343418. Friendly and central but reasonably quiet; gets the thumbs-up from visiting reps and businessmen, with a choice of fan and cold water or air-con and hot water in basic double or twin rooms with cable TV. ②

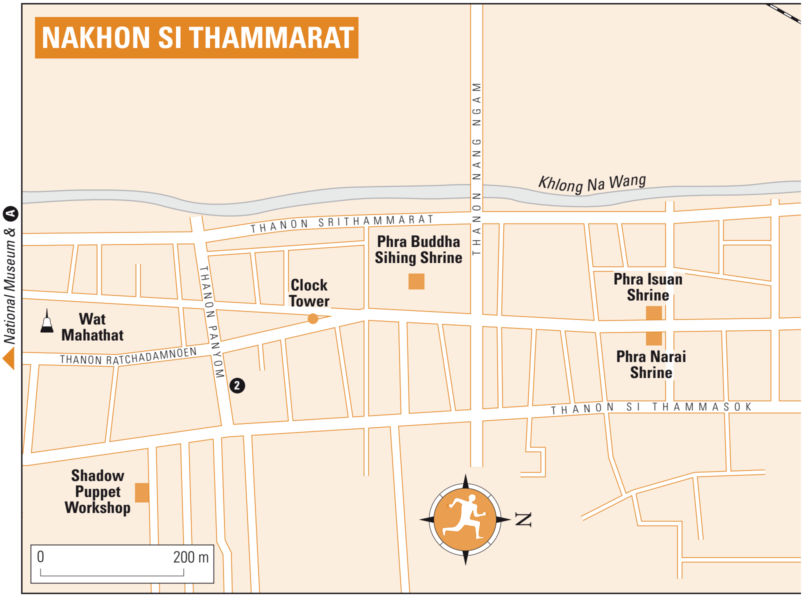
Grand Park Hotel 1204/79 Thanon Pak Nakhon Ⓣ075 317666–75, Ⓦwww.grandparknakhon.com. If you're looking for something more upmarket in the centre of town, this recently established place is worth considering – it's large, stylish and bright, with air-con, hot water, TV and fridge in every room, and staff are cheery and attentive. ④

Nakorn Garden Inn 1/4 Thanon Pak Nakhon Ⓣ075 313333, Ⓕ075 342926. A rustic but sophisticated haven in a three-storey, red-brick building overlooking a tree-shaded yard. Large, attractive rooms come with air-con, hot water, cable TV and mini-bars. ③

Thai Hotel 1375 Thanon Ratchadamnoen Ⓣ075 341509, Ⓦwww.thaihotel-nakorn.com. Formerly top of the range in Nakhon – and still boasting some of the trappings, such as liveried doorman – this large institutional high-rise is now offering very good value on its clean, reliable rooms, with fans and cold water or air-con and cold or hot water, all with cable TV. ②

Thai Lee Hotel 1130 Thanon Ratchadamnoen Ⓣ075 356948. For rock-bottom accommodation, the large, plain and reasonably clean rooms here aren't a bad deal (it's worth asking for a room at the back of the hotel to escape the noise of the main street). ①

Twin Lotus About 3km southeast of the centre at 97/8 Thanon Patanakarn Kukwang Ⓣ075 323777, Ⓕ075 323821. Gets pride of place in Nakhon – though not for its location; sports five restaurants, a large, attractive outdoor swimming pool and a health club. ⑥


NAKHON SI THAMMARAT
THANON NANG NGAM
Khlong Na Wang
THANON SRITHAMMARAT
Phra Buddha Sihing Shrine
Clock Tower
Phra Isuan Shrine
Wat Mahathat
THANON PANYOM
THANON RATCHADAMNOEN
2
Phra Narai Shrine
THANON SI THAMMASOK
Shadow Puppet Workshop
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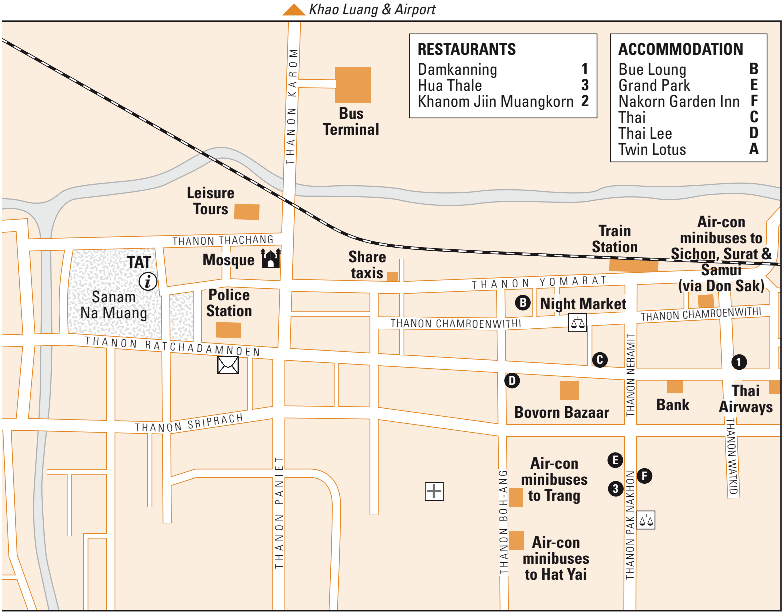
The Town

The **town plan** is simple, but puzzling at first sight: it runs in a straight line for 7km from north to south and is rarely more than a few hundred metres wide, a layout originally dictated by the availability of fresh water. The modern centre for businesses and shops sits at the north end around the train station, with the main day market (to the east of the station on Thanon Pak Nakhon) in this food-conscious city displaying a particularly fascinating array of produce that's best around 8 or 9am. To the south, centred on the elegant, traditional mosque on Thanon Karom, lies the old Muslim quarter; south again is the start of the old city walls, of which few remains can be seen, and the historic centre, with the town's main places of interest now set in a leafy residential area.

Wat Mahathat

Missing out **Wat Mahathat** would be like going to Rome and not visiting St Peter's, for the Buddha relics in the vast chedi make this the south's most important shrine. In the courtyard inside the temple cloisters, which have their main entrance facing Thanon Ratchadamnoen, about 2km south of the modern centre, row upon row of smaller chedis, spiked like bayonets, surround the main chedi, the **Phra Boromathat**. This huge, stubby Sri Lankan bell supports a slender, ringed spire, which is in turn topped by a shiny pinnacle said to be covered in 600kg of gold leaf. According to the chronicles, relics of the Buddha were brought here from Sri Lanka two thousand years ago by an Indian prince and princess and enshrined in a chedi. It's undergone plenty of face-lifts since: an earlier Srivijayan version, a model of which stands at one corner, is encased in the present twelfth-century chedi. The most recent restoration work, funded by donations from all over Thailand, rescued it from collapse, although it still seems to be leaning


Khao Luang & Airport
RESTAURANTS
Damkanning 1
Hua Thale 3
Khanom Jiin Muangkorn 2
ACCOMMODATION
Bue Loung B
Grand Park E
Nakorn Garden Inn F
Thai C
Thai Lee D
Twin Lotus A
Bus Terminal
THANON KAROM
Leisure Tours
THANON THACHANG
TAT
Sanam Na Muang
Mosque
Police Station
Share taxis
Train Station
Air-con minibuses to Sichon, Surat & Samui (via Don Sak)
THANON YOMARAT
Night Market
THANON CHAMROENWITHI
THANON CHAMROENWITHI
THANON RATCHADAMNOEN
THANON NERAMIT
Bovorn Bazaar
Bank
Thai Airways
THANON SRIPRACH
THANON WATKID
THANON PANIET
THANON BOH-ANG
Air-con minibuses to Trang
Air-con minibuses to Hat Yai
THANON PAK NAKHON

dangerously to the southeast. Worshippers head for the north side's vast enclosed stairway, framed by lions and giants, which they liberally decorate with gold leaf to add to the shrine's radiance and gain some merit.

The **Viharn Kien Museum** (hours irregular, but usually daily 8am–4pm), which extends north from the chedi, is an Aladdin's cave of bric-a-brac, said to house fifty thousand artefacts donated by worshippers, ranging from ships made out of seashells to gold and silver models of the Bodhi Tree. At the entrance to the museum, you'll pass the Phra Puay, an image of the Buddha giving a gesture of reassurance. Women pray to the image when they want to have children, and the lucky ones return to give thanks and to leave photos of their chubby progeny.

Outside the cloister to the south is the eighteenth-century **Viharn Luang**, raised on elegant slanting columns, a beautiful example of Ayutthayan architecture. The interior is austere at ground level, but the red coffered ceiling shines with carved and gilded stars and lotus blooms. In the spacious grounds on the viharn's south side, cheerful, inexpensive stalls peddle local handicrafts such as shadow puppets, bronze and basketware.

The National Museum

Ten minutes' walk south again from Wat Mahathat, the **National Museum** (Wed–Sun 9am–4pm; B30) houses a small but diverse collection, mostly of artefacts from southern Thailand. In the prehistory room downstairs, look out for the two impressive ceremonial bronze kettledrums dating from the fifth century BC, one of them topped with chunky frogs (the local frogs are said to be the biggest in Thailand and a prized delicacy). Also on the ground floor are some interesting Hindu finds, including several stone lingams from the seventh to ninth centuries AD and later bronze statues of Ganesh, the elephant-headed god of wisdom and the arts. Look out especially for a vivacious, well-preserved bronze of Shiva here, dancing within a ring of fire on the body of a dwarf demon, who holds a cobra symbolizing stupidity. Among the collections of ceramics upstairs, you can't miss the seat panel from Rama V's barge, a dazzling example of the nielloware for which Nakhon is famous – the delicate animals and landscapes have been etched onto a layer of gold which covers the silver base, and then picked out by inlaying a black alloy into the background. The nearby exhibition on local wisdom includes interesting displays on Buddhist ordinations and weddings, and on manohra, the southern Thai dramatic dance form.

The shadow puppet workshop

The best possible introduction to *nang thalung*, southern Thailand's **shadow puppet theatre**, is to head for Ban Nang Thalung Suchart Subsin, 110/18 Soi 3, Thanon Si Thammasok, ten minutes' walk east of Wat Mahathat (☎075 346394). Here Suchart Subsin, one of the south's leading exponents of *nang thalung*, and his son have opened up their workshop to the public, including a small museum of puppets dating back as far as the eighteenth century, and, for a small fee (usually around B100 per person), they'll show you a few scenes from a shadow play in the small open-air theatre. You can also see the intricate process of making the leather puppets and can buy the finished products as souvenirs: puppets sold here are of

Shadow puppets

Found throughout southern Asia, **shadow puppets** are one of the oldest forms of theatre, featuring in Buddhist literature as early as 400 BC. The art form seems to have come from India, via Java, to Thailand, where it's called *nang*, meaning "hide": the puppets are made from the skins of water buffalo or cows, which are softened in water, then pounded until almost transparent, before being carved and painted to represent the characters of the play. The puppets are then manipulated on bamboo rods in front of a bright light, to project their image onto a large white screen, while the story is narrated to the audience.

The grander version of the art, **nang yai** – "big hide", so called because the figures are life-size – deals only with the *Ramayana* story. It's known to have been part of the entertainment at official ceremonies in the Ayutthayan period, but has now almost died out. The more populist version, **nang thalung** – *thalung* is probably a shortening of the town name, Phatthalung (which is just down the road from Nakhon), where this version of the art form is said to have originated – is also in decline now: performances are generally limited to temple festivals, marriages, funerals and ordinations, lasting usually from 9pm to dawn. As well as working the sixty-centimetre-high *nang thalung* puppets, the puppet master narrates the story, impersonates the characters, chants and cracks jokes to the accompaniment of flutes, fiddles and percussion instruments. Not surprisingly, in view of this virtuoso semi-improvised display, puppet masters are esteemed as possessed geniuses by their public.

At big festivals, companies often perform the *Ramayana*, sometimes in competition with each other; at smaller events they put on more down-to-earth stories, with stock characters such as the jokers Yor Thong, an angry man with a pot belly and a sword, and Kaew Kop, a man with a frog's head. Yogi, a wizard and teacher, is thought to protect the puppet master and his company from evil spirits with his magic, so he is always the first puppet on at the beginning of every performance.

In an attempt to halt their decline as a form of popular entertainment, the puppet companies are now incorporating modern instruments and characters in modern dress into their shows, and are boosting the love element in their stories. They're fighting a battle they can't win against television and cinemas, although at least the debt owed to shadow puppets has been acknowledged – *nang* has become the Thai word for "movie".

much better quality and design than those usually found on southern Thailand's souvenir stalls.

The Phra Buddha Sihing shrine

In the chapel of the provincial administration complex on Thanon Ratchadamnoen sits the **Phra Buddha Sihing** statue (Mon–Fri 9am–noon & 1–4pm), which according to legend was magically created in Sri Lanka in the second century. In the thirteenth century it was sent by ship to the king of Sukhothai, but the vessel sank and the image miraculously floated on a plank to Nakhon. Two other images, one in the National Museum in Bangkok, one in Wat Phra Singh in Chiang Mai, claim to be the authentic Phra Buddha Sihing, but none of the three is in the Sri Lankan style, so they are all probably derived from a lost original. Although similar to the other two in size and shape, the image in Nakhon has a style unique to this area, distinguished by the heavily pleated flap of its robe over the left shoulder, a beaky nose and harsh features, which sit uneasily on the short, corpulent body. The image's plumpness has given the style the name *khanom tom* – "banana and rice pudding".

Eating and drinking

Nakhon is a great place for inexpensive **food**, not least at the busy, colourful night market on Thanon Chamroenwithi near the *Bue Loung Hotel*. If you're looking for somewhere to **drink**, head for *Rock 99*, a bar-restaurant with outdoor tables in the Bovorn Bazaar that's popular with Nakhon's sprinkling of expats.

Damkanning On the corner of Thanon Watkid and Thanon Ratchadamnoen. A decent Thai-Chinese fallback in the evening, one of several affordable, popular restaurants with pavement tables in the area.

Hao Coffee In the Bovorn Bazaar, Thanon Ratchadamnoen. Popular place modelled on an old Chinese-style coffee shop, packed full of ageing violins, clocks and other antiques. Offers a wide selection of Thai dishes, cakes, teas and coffees, including Thai filter coffee and delicious iced capuccinos. Daytime only.

Hua Thale Thanon Pak Nakhon, opposite the *Nakorn Garden Inn.* Nakhon's best restaurant, renowned among locals for its excellent, varied and inexpensive seafood. Plain and very clean, with an open kitchen and the day's catch displayed out front and relaxing patio tables and an air-con room at the back. Recommended dishes include whole baked fish, *yam het ku nu*, white mushroom salad with prawns and cashews, and *hoy meng pho op mordin*, large green mussels in a delicious herb soup containing lemon grass, basil and mint. Daily 4–10pm.

Khanom Jiin Muangkorn Thanon Panyom, near Wat Mahathat. Justly famous, inexpensive outdoor restaurant dishing up one of the local specialities, *khanom jiin*, noodles topped with hot, sweet or fishy sauce served with *pak ruam*, a platter of crispy raw vegetables. Lunchtimes only.

Krua Nakhon In the Bovorn Bazaar, Thanon Ratchadamnoen. A big, rustic pavilion with good *khanom jiin* and other cheap local dishes: *kaeng som*, a mild yellow curry; *kaeng tai plaa*, fish stomach curry; *khao yam*, a delicious southern salad of rice and vegetables; and various *khanom wan*, coconut milk puddings. Lunchtimes only.

Khao Luang National Park

Rising to the west of Nakhon Si Thammarat and temptingly visible from all over town, is 1835-metre-high **Khao Luang**, southern Thailand's highest mountain. A huge national park encompasses Khao Luang's jagged green peaks, beautiful streams with numerous waterfalls, tropical rainforest and fruit orchards, as well as the source of the Tapi River, one of the peninsula's main waterways, which flows into the Gulf of Thailand at Surat Thani. **Fauna** here include macaques, musk deer, civets, binturongs, as well as more difficult to see Malayan tapirs and serows, plus over two hundred bird species. There's an astonishing diversity of **flora** too, notably rhododendrons and begonias, dense mosses, ferns and lichens, plus more than three hundred species of both ground-growing and epiphytic orchids, some of which are unique to the park. The best time to visit is after the rainy season, from January onwards, when there should still be a decent flow in the waterfalls, but the trails will be dry and the leeches not so bad. However, the park's most distinguishing feature for visitors is probably its difficulty of access: main roads run around the 570-square-kilometre park with spursto some of the waterfalls, but there are no roads across the park and very sparse public transport along the spur roads. Only **Krung Ching Waterfall**, one of Thailand's most spectacular, really justifies the hassle of getting there.

Before heading off to Khao Luang, be sure to drop into Nakhon's TAT office for a useful park **brochure**, with a sketch map and sketchy details of the walking routes to Krung Ching waterfall and to the peak itself. For the latter, which begins at Ban Khiriwong on the southeast side of the park and involves at least one night camping on the mountain, contact the Ban Khiriwong Ecotourism Club (Ⓣ075 533113), who can arrange a trek to the peak, including meals and guides. Irregular **songthaews** on the main roads around the park and to Ban Khiriwong congregate on and around Thanon Chamroenwithi south of the *Bue Loung Hotel* in Nakhon. Leisure Tours, 921/10 Thanon Thachang (Ⓣ075 356829 or 086 940 6400), rents **motorbikes** (B150/day), and pricey air-conditioned **minibuses with drivers** are available from Muang Korn Travel, 1242/67 Thanon Boh-Ang (Ⓣ075 356574; B1800/day plus petrol); otherwise you might try doing a deal with a share-taxi driver at the bottom of Thanon Yomarat to take you to the park.

Krung Ching

A trip to **Krung Ching**, a nine-tier waterfall on the north side of the park, makes for a highly satisfying day out, with a mostly paved nature trail taking you through dense, steamy jungle to the most beautiful, third tier. The easiest way to **get there** from Nakhon with your own transport is to head north on Highway 401 towards Surat Thani, turning west at Tha Sala onto Highway 4140, then north again at Ban Nopphitam onto Highway 4186, before heading south from Ban Huai Phan on Highway 4188, the spur road to Ban Phitham and the Krung Ching park office, a total journey of about 70km. Songthaews will get you from Nakhon to Ban Huai Phan in about an hour, but you'd then have to hitch the last 13km. Two- to six-person bungalows, most with hot water, are available at the park office (B200–1800); camping is free if you bring your own tent. There's a sporadically open canteen, and an informal shop selling snacks and drinks.

The shady four-kilometre **trail** to the dramatic main fall is very steep in parts, so you should allow four hours at least there and back. On the way you'll pass giant ferns, including a variety known as *maha sadam*, the largest fern in the world, gnarled banyan trees, forests of mangosteen and beautiful, thick stands of bamboo. You're bound to see colourful birds and insects, but you may well only hear macaques and other mammals. At the end, a long, stepped descent brings you to a perfectly positioned wooden platform with fantastic views of the forty-metre fall; here you can see how, shrouded in thick spray, it earns its Thai name, Fon Saen Ha, meaning "thousands of rainfalls".

Sichon

The coast north from Nakhon is dotted with small, Thai-oriented beach resorts, none of which can match the Ko Samui archipelago, in the Gulf beyond, for looks or facilities. However, if you're searching for a quiet, low-key antidote to Samui's

Western-style commercialism, the most interesting of these resorts, **SICHON**, might be just the place.

Buses, air-con minibuses and share-taxis make the 65-kilometre journey north from Nakhon along the Surat Thani road to Talat Sichon, as the town's unpromising modern centre, with a few facilities such as banks and plenty of motorbike taxis, is known. This half-hearted, built-up area sprawls lazily eastwards for 3km to Pak Nam Sichon, a lively and scenic fishing port at the mouth of the eponymous river. Here, when they're not fishing in the bay, brightly coloured boats of all sizes draw up at the docks, backed by low-slung traditional wooden shophouses, the angular hills around Khanom beyond and, in the far distance, Ko Samui. About 1km south of the river mouth, **Hat Sichon** (aka Hat Hin Ngarm) begins, a pretty crescent bay of shelving white sand ending in a tree-tufted, rocky promontory. The beach is home to the best-value accommodation option in the area, *Prasarnsuk Villa* (ⓣ075 335562, ⓦwww.pssresort.com; fan ④, air-con ⑤), a neatly organized, welcoming place with a good, popular restaurant that stretches to a few tables and umbrellas on the beach. Amid spacious lawns, trees and flowers, bungalows range from decent, fan-cooled, en-suite affairs with verandas to suites with air-con, hot water, fridge and TV. The next beach south, **Hat Piti**, is not quite so attractive, a long, straight, deserted stretch of white sand backed by palm trees. But if you want a few more facilities, this is where to come: *Piti Resort* (ⓣ075 335301–4, ⓦwww.pitiresort.com; ⑦), 2km south of *Prasarnsuk*, can offer a small swimming pool, a fitness room and a tastefully designed beachside restaurant, as well as hot water, air-con, fridge and cable TV in all bungalows and rooms.

Travel details

Trains

Ban Krud to: Bangkok (2 daily; 6hr–7hr 30min); Hua Hin (2 daily; 3hr 30min); Phetchaburi (2 daily; 6hr); Prachuap Khiri Khan (2 daily; 30min).

Bang Saphan Yai to: Bangkok (4 daily; 6hr 30min–8hr); Hua Hin (4 daily; 3–4hr); Phetchaburi (3 daily; 4hr–4hr 30min); Prachuap Khiri Khan (4 daily; 20min–1hr).

Cha-am to: Bangkok (12 daily; 3hr 10min–3hr 50min); Chumphon (10 daily; 4–5hr); Hua Hin (11 daily; 25min); Surat Thani (7 daily; 7hr 10min–8hr 25min).

Chumphon to: Bangkok (11 daily; 7hr–9hr 30min); Hua Hin (11 daily; 3hr 30min–5hr); Surat Thani (11 daily; 2hr 5min–4hr).

Nakhon Si Thammarat to: Bangkok (2 daily; 15–16hr); Chumphon (2 daily; 6hr–6hr 30min); Hua Hin (2 daily; 11hr 30min); Surat Thani (Phunphin; 2 daily; 3hr 30min).

Hua Hin to: Bangkok (12 daily; 3hr 30min–4hr); Chumphon (11 daily; 3hr 30min–5hr 20min); Prachuap Khiri Khan (9 daily; 2hr 40min–3hr 40min); Surat Thani (11 daily; 5hr 40min–8hr).

Phetchaburi to: Bangkok (8 daily; 2hr 45min–3hr 45min); Cha-am (12 daily; 35min); Chumphon (9 daily; 4hr 30min–6hr 30min); Hua Hin (10 daily; 1hr); Prachuap Khiri Khan (9 daily; 3hr 40min–4hr 10min); Surat Thani (9 daily; 6hr 45min–9hr).

Prachuap Khiri Khan to: Bangkok (9 daily; 4hr 15min–7hr 40min).

Surat Thani (Phunphin) to: Bangkok (11 daily; 9–12hr); Butterworth (Malaysia; 1 daily; 10hr 30min); Chumphon (11 daily; 2–3hr); Hat Yai (5 daily; 4–5hr); Hua Hin (11 daily; 5–8hr); Nakhon Si Thammarat (2 daily; 3hr 30min); Phatthalung (5 daily; 3–4hr); Trang (2 daily; 4hr).

Buses

Cha-am to: Bangkok (every 40min; 2hr 45min–3hr 15min).

Chumphon to: Bangkok (12 daily; 7–9hr); Hat Yai (4 daily; 7hr 30min); Hua Hin (every 40min; 3hr 30min–4hr 30min); Phuket (3 daily; 7hr); Ranong (hourly; 2hr); Surat Thani (every 30min; 2hr 45min).

Hua Hin to: Bangkok (every 40min; 3–4hr); Cha-am (every 30min; 35min); Chumphon (every 40min; 3hr 30min–4hr 30min); Hat Yai (4 daily; 10hr); Krabi (3 daily; 9hr); Phetchaburi (every 30min; 1hr 30min); Phuket (7 daily; 9hr); Pranburi (every 20min; 40min); Surat Thani (4 daily; 7hr).

Ko Samui to: Bangkok (Southern Terminal; 8 daily;

12–13hr); Nakhon Si Thammarat (1 daily; 5hr).

Nakhon Si Thammarat to: Bangkok (Southern Terminal; 11 daily; 12hr); Hat Yai (16 daily; 3hr); Ko Samui (1 daily; 5hr); Krabi (2 daily; 3hr); Phatthalung (7 daily; 3hr); Phuket (7 daily; 8hr); Ranong (1 daily; 6hr); Surat Thani (21 daily; 2hr 30min); Trang (3 daily; 2–3hr).

Phetchaburi to: Bangkok (every 30min; 2hr); Cha-am (every 30 min; 50min); Chumphon (about every 2hr; 5–6hr); Hua Hin (every 30 min; 1hr 30min).

Prachuap Khiri Khan to: Bangkok (every 30min; 4–5hr); Chumphon (6 daily; 2–3hr); Hua Hin (every 30min; 1hr 30min–2hr); Phetchaburi (every 30min; 3hr–3hr 30min).

Pranburi to: Bangkok (every 40min; 3hr 30min); Hua Hin (every 20min; 40min).

Surat Thani to: Bangkok (Southern Terminal; 10 daily; 10–11hr); Chumphon (hourly; 3hr 30min); Hat Yai (11 daily; 5hr); Krabi (23 daily; 3–4hr); Nakhon Si Thammarat (21 daily; 2hr 30min); Phang Nga (10 daily; 3hr 30min); Phatthalung (10 daily; 5hr); Phuket (14 daily; 5–6hr); Phunphin (every 10min; 40min); Ranong (9 daily; 4–5hr).

Flights

Hua Hin to: Bangkok (3 daily; 40min).

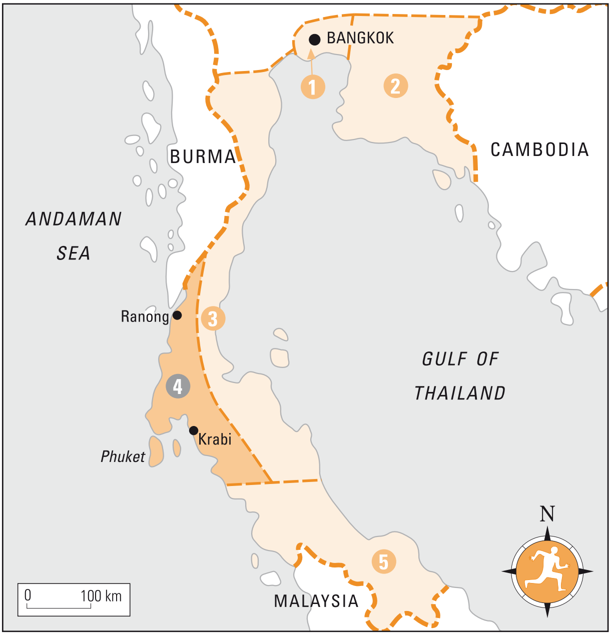
Ko Samui to: Bangkok (20 daily; 1hr–1hr 30min); Hong Kong (4 weekly; 3hr); Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (2 weekly; 2hr); Pattaya (2 daily; 1hr); Phuket (2 daily; 50min); Singapore (daily except Tues; 1hr 40min).

Nakhon Si Thammarat to: Bangkok (3–5 daily; 1hr 15min).

Surat Thani to: Bangkok (4 daily; 1hr 10min).

4

Southern Thailand: the Andaman coast


BANGKOK
1
2
BURMA
CAMBODIA
ANDAMAN SEA
Ranong
3
4
Krabi
Phuket
GULF OF THAILAND
5
MALAYSIA
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0 100 km

CHAPTER 4 Highlights

- ✱ **Island idylls** Tranquillity rules on the uncommercial islands of Ko Phayam, Ko Yao Noi and Ko Jum. See pp.364, 418 and 461

- ✱ **Khao Sok National Park** Sleep in a treehouse or on a lake, and wake to the sound of hooting gibbons. See p.372

- ✱ **Ko Similan** Remote chain of islands with some of the best diving in the world. See p.385

- ✱ **Reefs and wrecks** Dive Thailand's finest underwater sights from Phuket, Ko Phi Phi, Ao Nang or Ko Lanta. See pp.408, 454, 447 and 468

- ✱ **The Vegetarian Festival** Awesome public acts of self-mortification on parade in Phuket. See p.395

- ✱ **Sea-canoeing in Ao Phang Nga** The perfect way to explore the limestone karsts and hidden lagoons of this spectacular bay. See p.424

- ✱ **Rock-climbing on Laem Phra Nang** Even novices can get a bird's-eye view of the fabulous coastal scenery. See p.440

- ✱ **Ko Lanta** Lots of long white-sand beaches: lively or remote, the choice is yours. See p.465

△ Ko Yao Noi

4

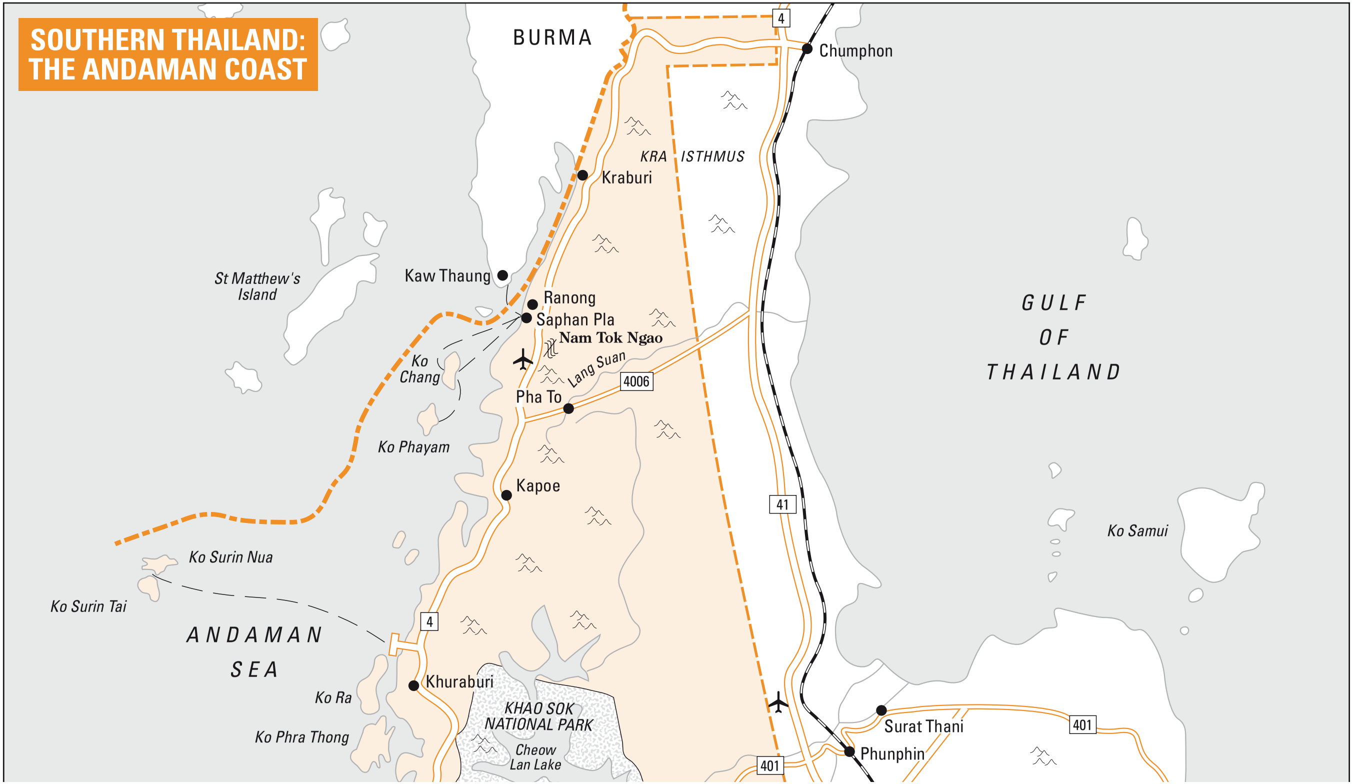
Southern Thailand: the Andaman coast

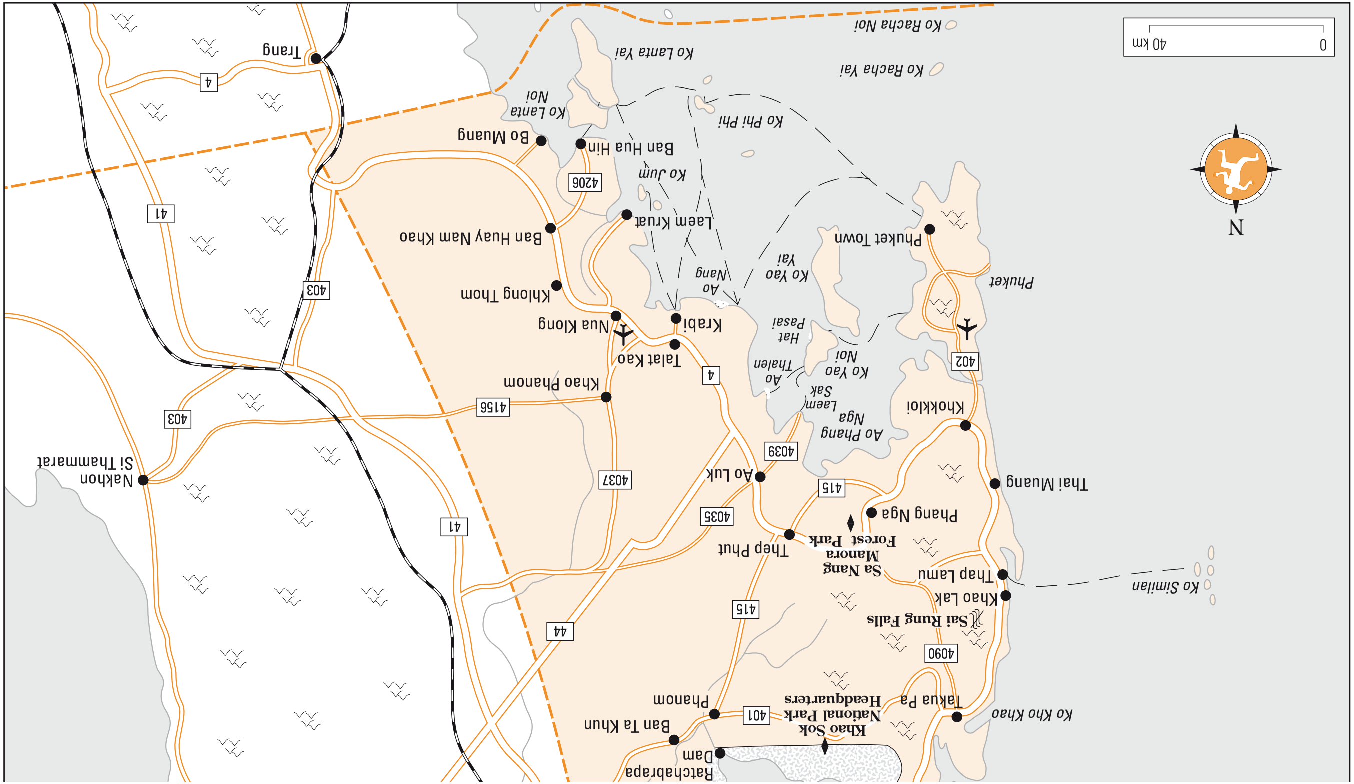
As Highway 4 switches from the east flank of the Thailand peninsula to the **Andaman coast** it enters a markedly different country: nourished by rain nearly all the year round, the vegetation down here is lushly tropical, with forests reaching up to 80m in height, and massive rubber and coconut plantations replacing the rice and sugar-cane fields of central Thailand. Sheer limestone crags spike every horizon and the translucent Andaman Sea harbours the largest **coral reefs** and most rewarding dive spots in the country. This is of course the same sea whose terrifyingly powerful **tsunami** waves battered the coastline in December 2004, killing thousands not only in Thailand but around Asia and even East Africa, and changing countless lives and communities for ever. The waves have left many wounds along Thailand's Andaman coast, for more on which see p.380, but with one partial exception all its affected tourist resorts have re-emerged as enjoyable holiday destinations. Now more than ever, locals depend on tourists for their economic survival, and holidaymakers have been returning in their hundreds of thousands to honour that bond.

There's plenty to tempt them. The attractions of the northern Andaman shores are often ignored by those keen to race down to the high-profile honeypots around Phuket and Krabi, but gems up here include the idyllic islands of **Ko Chang** (not to be confused with its larger, more famous namesake off the east coast) and **Ko Phayam**; the awesome, world-class reefs of the **Ko Surin** and **Ko Similan** island chains; and the enjoyable **Khao Sok National Park**, where you can stay on a raft or in a treehouse beneath looming limestone outcrops. Tourism begins in earnest on **Phuket**, Thailand's largest island and a popular place to learn to dive, though the high-rises and consumerist gloss that characterize many of the beaches here don't appeal to everyone. Those in search of a quieter island retreat head across to rural **Ko Yao Noi**, scenically located on the periphery of spectacular **Ao Phang Nga**, whose artfully scattered karst islets make it one of the country's top natural wonders, best appreciated from a sea-canoe. The Andaman coast's second hub is at **Krabi**, springboard for the hugely popular mainland beaches of unexceptional **Ao Nang**, upmarket **Klong Muang** and spectacular **Laem Phra Nang**, and departure point for boats to picturesque but overcrowded **Ko Phi Phi**, low-key **Ko Jum** and long and still lovely **Ko Lanta Yai**.

Unlike the Gulf coast, the Andaman coast is hit by the **southwest monsoon**, which usually gets going by the end of May and lasts at least until the middle of

SOUTHERN THAILAND: THE ANDAMAN COAST


BURMA
Chumphon
4
KRA ISTHMUS
Kraburi
Kaw Thaung
St Matthew's Island
Ranong
Saphan Pla
Nam Tok Ngao
Lang Suan
4006
Ko Chang
Pha To
Ko Phayam
Kapoe
Ko Surin Nua
Ko Surin Tai
ANDAMAN SEA
4
Khuraburi
Ko Ra
Ko Phra Thong
KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK
Cheow Lan Lake
401
41
GULF OF THAILAND
Ko Samui
Surat Thani
Phunphin
401


Nakhon Si Thammarat
Trang
Ratchabrapa Dam
Ban Ta Khun
Phanom
Khao Sok National Park Headquarters
Takua Pa
Ko Kho Khao
Sai Rung Falls
Khao Lak
Thap Lamu
Sa Nang Manora Forest Park
Phang Nga
Thai Muang
Thep Phut
Ao Luk
Khokkloi
Ao Phang Nga
Laem Sak
Ko Yao Noi
Ao Thalen
Hat Pasai
Ko Yao Yai
Phuket Town
Phuket
Talat Kao
Krabi
Ao Nang
Nua Klong
Khao Phanom
Khlong Thom
Ban Huay Nam Khao
Laem Kruat
Ko Jum
Ban Hua Hin
Bo Muang
Ko Lanta Noi
Ko Lanta Yai
Ko Phi Phi
Ko Racha Yai
Ko Racha Noi
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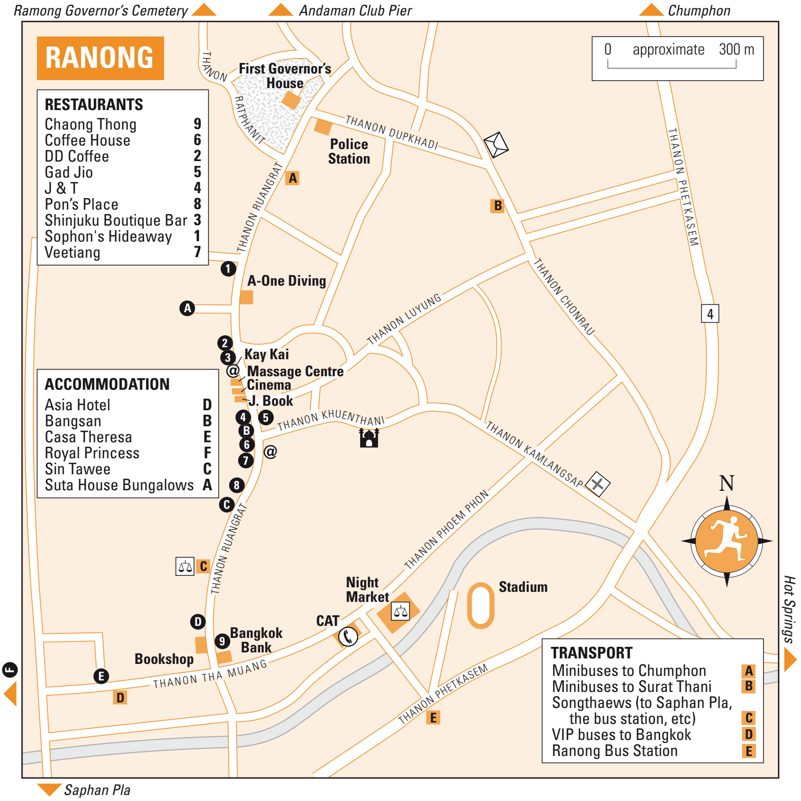
October. During this period heavy rain and high seas render some of the outer islands inaccessible, but conditions aren't generally severe enough to ruin a holiday on the other islands, or on the mainland, and you're likely to get good discounts on accommodation. Although some bungalows at the smaller resorts shut down entirely during low season, most beaches covered in this chapter keep at least one place open, and many dive shops lead expeditions year-round as well.

There is no rail line down the Andaman coast, but many travellers take the **train** from Bangkok to the Gulf coast and then nip across by bus; most direct **buses** from the capital travel south overnight. The faster option is to arrive by plane: both Phuket and Krabi have international **airports**, and there's a domestic airport at Trang, not far from Ko Lanta in the deep south.

Ranong and around

Thailand's Andaman coast begins at **Kraburi**, where, at kilometre-stone 545 (the distance from Bangkok), a signpost welcomes you to the **Kra Isthmus**, the narrowest part of peninsular Thailand. At this point just 22km separates the Gulf of Thailand from the mangrove-fringed inlet where the Chan River flows into the Andaman Sea, west of which lies the southernmost tip of mainland Burma, Kaw


Ramong Governor's Cemetery
Andaman Club Pier
Chumphon
RANONG
0 approximate 300 m
RESTAURANTS
Chaong Thong 9
Coffee House 6
DD Coffee 2
Gad Jio 5
J & T 4
Pon's Place 8
Shinjuku Boutique Bar 3
Sophon's Hideaway 1
Veetiang 7
ACCOMMODATION
Asia Hotel D
Bangsan B
Casa Theresa E
Royal Princess F
Sin Tawee C
Suta House Bungalows A
TRANSPORT
Minibuses to Chumphon A
Minibuses to Surat Thani B
Songthaews (to Saphan Pla, the bus station, etc) C
VIP buses to Bangkok D
Ranong Bus Station E
First Governor's House
Police Station
THANON RATPHANIT
THANON DUPKHADI
THANON RUANGRAT
THANON PHETKASEM
THANON CHONRAU
THANON LUYUNG
THANON KHUENTHANI
THANON KAMLANGSAP
THANON PHOEM PHON
THANON THA MUANG
A-One Diving
Kay Kai
Massage Centre
Cinema
J. Book
Night Market
Stadium
CAT
Bangkok Bank
Bookshop
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Thaung (aka Victoria Point). Ever since the seventeenth century, Thai governments and foreign investors have been keenly interested in this slender strip of land, envisaging the creation of an Asian Suez canal that would cut some 1500km off shipping routes between the Indian Ocean (Andaman Sea) and the South China Sea (the Gulf of Thailand). Despite a number of detailed proposals, no agreement has yet been reached, not least because of the political implications of such a waterway: quite apart from accentuating the divide between prosperous southern Thailand and the rest of the country, it would vastly reduce Singapore's role in the international shipping industry.

Seventy kilometres south of the isthmus, the channel widens out at the provincial capital of **Ranong**, which thrives on its proximity to Burma. Thai tourists have been coming here for years, to savour the health-giving properties of the local spring water, but foreign holidaymakers have only recently discovered that Ranong is a useful departure point for the delightful nearby islands of **Ko Chang**, which appeals to those who prefer paraffin lamps and early nights, and **Ko Phayam**, which attracts a more sociable crowd. The other reason to stop off in Ranong is to make a day-trip to the Burmese town of **Kaw Thaung** and acquire a new thirty-day Thai tourist **visa** into the bargain – an option that's popular with Phuket expats.

Ranong is the capital of Thailand's wettest province, which soaks up over 5000mm of rain every year – a fact you'll undoubtedly experience first-hand if you linger in the region. The landscape to the south of Ranong town is particularly lush, and any journey along Highway 4 will whizz you between waterfall-streaked hills to the east and mangrove swamps, rubber plantations and casuarina groves to the west; much of this coastal strip is preserved as **Laem Son National Park**.

Ranong Town

Despite being the wettest town in the country, **RANONG** (Ⓦwww.ranong.go.th) has a pleasing buzz about it, fuelled by the mix of Burmese, Thai, Chinese and Malay inhabitants. As with most border areas, however, there's also a flourishing illegal trade operating out of Ranong – in amphetamines, guns and labour, allegedly – not to mention the inevitable tensions over international fishing rights, which sometimes end in shoot-outs, though the closest you're likely to get to any of these activities is reading about them in the *Bangkok Post*.

Ranong's history is closely associated with its most famous son, **Khaw Soo Cheang**, a poor Chinese emigrant who was to become the first governor of Ranong province and a man so respected that politicians continue to pay public homage at his grave more than a century after his death. Khaw Soo Cheang emigrated from China in 1810 a penniless peasant. After six years in Penang he moved to southern Thailand, where he became enormously successful both in trading with Penang, and in tin-mining. By the 1840s he had been granted the sole right to operate tin mines in the Ranong area and, admired by the government and Rama IV for his ruthlessness and commercial acuity, was appointed the first governor of Ranong province in 1854. He proved his mettle once more in Rama V's reign, when in 1876 he quashed a violent rebellion by maltreated immigrant tin-miners, and was duly rewarded with a title equivalent to Raja of Ranong. Following Khaw Soo Cheang's death in 1882, his sons were also ennobled by the king and made governors of Ranong and other southern provinces. The family was honoured again in 1916 when Rama VI decreed that all descendants of Khaw Soo Cheang living in Thailand should have the surname "na Ranong" ("of Ranong"), an aristocratic title that still commands respect today. Little now remains of Khaw Soo Cheang's house, but in its grounds, west off Thanon Ruangrat on the northern edge of town, descendants have established a shrine and small museum, the **First Governor's House** (Nai Khai Ranong; daily 9am–4.30pm; free), to the Khaw clan, with photos, newspaper cuttings and other memorabilia on display. Follow either road running north from near the First Governor's House, in the direction of the Andaman Club pier, for about 4km to reach his burial site at the **Ranong Governor's Cemetery**, where Chinese-style horseshoe-shaped graves and a series of symbolic stone statues stand proud at the foot of the expansive, tree-lined, grassy hill donated to Khaw Soo Cheang for this purpose by a grateful Rama V; songthaews from the Thanon Ruangrat market should get you there in about 15 minutes.

The **geothermal springs** (daily 8am–5pm; B10) so favoured by Thai tourists are the focus of Raksawarin Park, about 3km east of the central Thanon Ruangrat market and accessible on songthaew #2 or by motorbike taxi. At the park, you can buy eggs to boil in the sulphurous 65°C water, or paddle in the cooler pools that have been siphoned off from the main springs. To properly appreciate the springs you need to soak in the mineral water, either at the Jacuzzis in the Siam Hot Spa Ranong complex just across the road (daily 6.30am–10pm), which also offers spa, massage and steam treatments, or in the Jacuzzis at *Royal Princess Hotel* on the western edge of town (daily 4–9pm; B60 for non-guests).

If you haven't had enough of water features, you could make a trip out of town to the impressive **Nam Tok Ngao**, an enormous waterfall 12km south of Ranong, which cascades almost all the way down the eastern hillside in full view of Highway 4. It's part of Nam Tok Ngao National Park (Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp; B200). Any south-bound bus will drop you there. Another enjoyable day out would be to head into the interior for a day's organized rafting at **Pha To**, 51km east of Ranong, off Route 4006 to Chumphon (see p.290 for details); Runs n' Roses tours and accommodation at Pha To (Ⓦwww.runsroses.com) can be booked through Ranong tour agencies.

Arrival, transport and information

All Andaman-coast **buses** travelling between Bangkok or Chumphon and Khuraburi, Takua Pa, Phuket or Krabi stop briefly at Ranong's **bus station** on Highway 4 (Thanon Phetkasem), 1500m southeast of the central market. Coming from Khao Sok or Surat Thani, you'll usually need to change buses at Takua Pa, though there is also a private minibus service to and from Surat Thani (4 daily; 3hr; B130), which uses a depot on Thanon Chonrau. There is a direct government bus service from **Chumphon** (2–3hr), as well as a faster private minibus service (hourly 6am–5pm; 2hr; B100) that operates from a terminal at the northern end of Thanon Ruangrat, so from Bangkok it's often more comfortable to take a night **train** to Chumphon and then change onto a bus or minibus. There are currently no scheduled **flights** in or out of Ranong airport, which is 20km south of Ranong on Highway 4, but Phuket Airlines (Ⓣ077 824591, Ⓦwww.phuketairlines.com) may resume its Bangkok–Ranong operations.

City songthaews serve major destinations in and around Ranong and most of them start from and terminate in front of the Thanon Ruangrat market, close to town-centre hotels. Many songthaews have their destinations written in English on the side, and most charge B10–15 per ride. Several songthaews pass Ranong bus station, including one that runs to the Thanon Ruangrat hotels and day market, and another that shuttles between the bus station and the port area at Saphan Pla, 5km to the southwest, where you pick up boats to Kaw Thaung, Ko Chang and Ko Phayam (see p.365); another songthaew runs direct from the market on Thanon Ruangrat to the Saphan Pla port area.

The best source of **tourist information** in town is the ever helpful Pon at *Pon's Place* restaurant and tour agency at 129 Thanon Ruangrat (daily

7.30am–9pm; ⓣ081 597 4549, ⓔponplace@hotmail.com), where you can also book a visa run to Burma and back (B650, including the visa), arrange tours of the local area (weekends only), book accommodation on Ko Chang and Ko Phayam, rent bicycles (B80/day), motorbikes (B200/day) and cars (B1200–1500/day), and buy air, bus and (Chumphon) train tickets. *Kay Kai* Internet centre and restaurant further north on Thanon Ruangrat also rents out motorbikes for B200 per day.

Accommodation

Most travellers linger in Ranong for just one night, but there's a reasonable spread of accommodation to choose from.

Asia Hotel 39/9 Thanon Ruangrat ⓣ077 811113. Painted pale blue inside and out, this very central, typical Thai-Chinese hotel has large and mostly quite spruce fan and air-con rooms, all of them en suite. Fan ②, air-con ④

Bangsan 225 Thanon Ruangrat ⓣ089 727 4334, ⓔbangsanbar@chaiyo.com. Cheap and funky guest house occupying the floor above the Sixties-styled *TV Bar*. Rooms share bathrooms and are simple but cheerful despite mostly having no windows. It's a popular spot so call ahead. ①

Casa Theresa 119/18 Thanon Tha Muang ⓣ077 811135, ⓦwww.casatheresa.com. Set around a small garden and open-sided lobby area, this is a quiet guest house, located behind a streetfront bakery shop (which also serves fresh coffee). It's a bit of a walk from the market, but handy for transport to Saphan Pla. All but the cheapest rooms have bathrooms, though not all the cheaper air-con rooms have windows; the very comfortable VIP options, huge and with air-con and TV, are the best value. Fan ②, air-con without window ③, VIP ⑤

Royal Princess 41/144 Thanon Tha Muang ⓣ077 835240, ⓦranong.royalprincess.com. Modern chain hotel that's the most luxurious in town. As well as typical upmarket air-con rooms, the hotel has an outdoor Jacuzzi pool filled with local spa water, a swimming pool and massage centre. ⑥–⑧

Sin Tawee 81/1 Thanon Ruangrat ⓣ077 811213. Central place, of a similar style to the *Asia Hotel* but cheaper and shabbier. There's a choice of en-suite accommodation ranging from small fan rooms to larger versions with TV, and air-con options at the top end. Fan ①, air-con ②

Suta House Bungalows Thanon Ruangrat ⓣ077 832707. Set 100m off the main road this is an unusual find in a city as it comprises a row of small but well-maintained air-con bungalows, all of them with TV. It also has some fan rooms in a low-rise building, all of which have private bathrooms though they are not en suite. Fills up fast so reserve ahead. Fan rooms ②, air-con bungalows ③

Eating and drinking

Ranong's ethnic diversity ensures an ample range of **eating** options, and a stroll up Thanon Ruangrat will take you past Muslim foodstalls and Chinese pastry shops as well as a small but typically Thai night market. A bigger night market convenes at dusk just east of the CAT phone office off Thanon Phoem Phon. There's a small nightlife zone of bars on Thanon Ruangrat around the Thanon Luyung junction.

Chaong Thong 8–10 Thanon Ruangrat. Choose from a long and varied selection of inexpensive dishes that includes Spanish omelette, shrimp curry and lemon-grass tea, as well as lots of veggie options and hearty breakfasts. Closed Sun.

Coffee House 173 Thanon Ruangrat. Managed by the same French-Thai family who run *Aow Yai Bungalows* on Ko Phayam, this is the place for filled baguettes (from B50), pancakes, cheap fried rice (B30) – and coffee. You can also book accommodation at *Aow Yai Bungalows* and speedboats to Ko Phayam here.

DD Coffee 299 Thanon Ruangrat. Despite the name, this place only gets going in the evening when locals pack the outdoor, streetside terrace for an evening of whisky drinking and chat.

Gad Jio Thanon Ruangrat. Expat-oriented bar-restaurant serving mid-priced burgers, steaks and pizzas.

J & T Thanon Ruangrat. Very popular family café serving cheap Thai fare (B20–50), including stir-fries, soups, salads and over-rice dishes.

Pon's Place Thanon Ruangrat. Opens at 7.30am for breakfast and continues dishing out cheap farang-oriented food and travel advice until 9pm.

Shinjuku Boutique Bar 297 Thanon Ruangrat. Another local favourite drinking spot, also with sports TV.

Sophon's Hideaway Thanon Ruangrat. Relaxed place wreathed in greenery that's a favourite with local expats both for its good food, including sour'n spicy fish curry (B65) and fried pork spare ribs (B80), and cheap beer, as well as for its lounge area, which shows international sports on its TV and has a pool table.

Veetiang 159 Thanon Ruangrat. Boasts an extensive and inexpensive menu covering all manner of seafood cooked to Thai and Chinese recipes, as well as standard over-rice dishes.

Listings

Banks and exchange There's a Bangkok Bank with an ATM and an exchange counter at the southern end of Thanon Ruangrat, and several other banks with ATMs within a few hundred metres' walk, west of the junction with Thanon Tha Muang.

Bookshops English-language books and newspapers from the bookstore at 35-37 Thanon Ruangrat. J Book opposite the Thanon Luyung junction on Thanon Ruangrat (daily noon-9pm) has a few second-hand English books for rent and sale.

Dive centre Ko Phayam's A-One Diving has an office at 256 Thanon Ruangrat ⓣ077 832984, ⓦwww.a-one-diving.com.

Emergencies The police station is Dupkhadi ⓣ077 811173.

Hospital The Thonburi-Ranong hospital is at 41/142 Thanon Tha Muang ⓣ077 834214.

Immigration office 5km out of town in Saphan Pla; for details on how to extend or renew your visa here see opposite.

Internet access At several places north of the *Sin Tawee* hotel on Thanon Ruangrat, including Kay Kai, and Catnet at the CAT international phone office (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm) on Thanon Tha Muang.

Mail At the GPO on Thanon Chonrau, 1.5km north-east of the central market. You can buy stamps more centrally, at the pharmacy at 31 Thanon Ruangrat, south of the *Asia Hotel*.

Massage The massage centre next to the cinema on Thanon Ruangrat offers everything from Thai massage to hot-stone massage (B250–1100).

Telephones The CAT international phone office is on Thanon Tha Muang (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm).

Into Burma: visa runs and Kaw Thaung (Ko Song)

The southernmost tip of Burma – known as **Kaw Thaung** in Burmese, Ko Song in Thai, and Victoria Point when it was a British colony – lies just a few kilometres west of Ranong across the Chan River estuary, and is easily reached by longtail boat from Saphan Pla fishing port, 5km southwest of Ranong town centre on the Thai side of the border. It's quite straightforward for foreign tourists to **enter Burma** at this point, and nipping across the border and back is a popular way of getting a new thirty-day Thai tourist visa – though it does mean you're giving your money to the Burmese military regime. You can either do it independently, as described below, or you can make use of one of the numerous "**visa run**" **services** advertised all over town, including at *Pon's Place*; this might cost you a bit more (B650 including visa) but will save you time. Most visa-run operators use the Saphan Pla route into Burma, but there is a more luxurious alternative which entails using the fast **Andaman Club boat** (ⓣ077 830461; 15 daily from 7am–11.50pm; 20min; B650 return including visa, but you must have at least 3 days remaining on your current Thai visa), which departs from the Andaman Club pier 5km north of Ranong's town centre and travels to and from the swanky *Andaman Club* hotel (ⓣ081 894 2583, ⓦwww.andamanclub.com; ⑨), casino and duty-free complex, located on a tiny island in Burmese waters just south of Kaw Thaung. The *Andaman Club* has its own immigration facilities, so the whole process is much faster than going via Saphan Pla, and you can also have lunch, stay over if you want to and check out the duty free shopping. Phone ahead for *Andaman Club* transport from Ranong town to the pier (B100 per person), or take a songthaew there from the Thanon Ruangrat market (B20).

Visa-run practicalities

All non-Thais must first get a Thai exit stamp before boarding a boat to Kaw Thaung, so take a songthaew from Ranong bound for **Saphan Pla** – the fastest and most direct songthaew from the market is the red #3 (20min; B10–15) – and get out of the songthaew at the Thai **immigration office** (daily 8.30am–6pm), across the road from the Thai Farmers Bank on the outskirts of Saphan Pla. Once you've got your stamp you can either accompany the hovering boat boys (who charge B300 per person return) or continue walking down the road for about fifteen minutes until you reach the PTT petrol station, where you should turn down to the right to find a quayside thick with longtails. There's another small quay a few hundred metres further up the quayside, but the PTT one is busier.

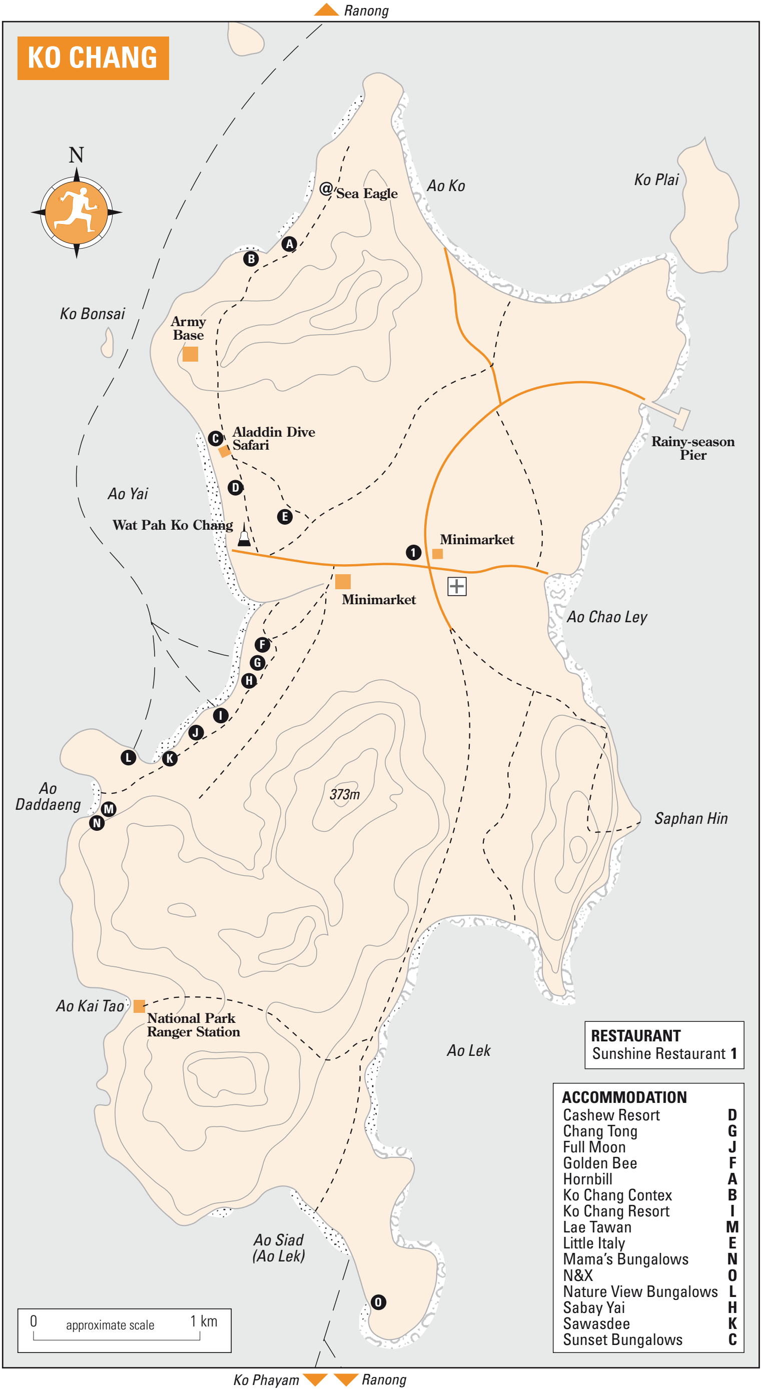
Longtails leave for Kaw Thaung when they have enough custom: the fare should be B50 one-way per person. The crossing takes about thirty minutes, but en route you will stop at tiny Snake Island where you buy your Burmese visa from the **Burmese immigration** office: US$5 (or B300) gets you a one- to three-day pass, which entitles you to stay up to two nights in Kaw Thaung but not to travel anywhere beyond. Next stop is Kaw Thaung itself, a few minutes' boat ride further on, where you will need to get stamped out of Burma at the immigration office up the hill from the pier. Once you've had enough of Kaw Thaung, you may or may not be taken via Snake Island again on your boat ride back to Saphan Pla. Once back on Thai soil you must return to the Thai immigration office to get your new Thai thirty-day tourist visa before catching a songthaew back to Ranong. Note that Burma time is 30 minutes behind Thailand time, and that to get back into Thailand you'll have to be at the immigration office in Saphan Pla before it closes at 6pm.

Kaw Thaung

Although there's nothing much to do in **KAW THAUNG** itself, it's an enjoyable focus for a trip out of Ranong, and sufficiently different from Thai towns to merit an hour or two's visit. Alighting at the quay, the market, immigration office, and tiny town centre lie before you, while over to your right, about twenty minutes' walk away, you can't miss the hilltop **Pyi Taw Aye Pagoda**, surmounted by a huge reclining Buddha and a ring of smaller ones. Once you've explored the covered market behind the quay and picked your way through the piles of tin trunks and sacks of rice that crowd the surrounding streets, it's fun to take a coffee break in one of the typically Burmese quayside pastry shops before negotiating a ride in a boat back to Saphan Pla; Thai money is perfectly acceptable in Kaw Thaung.

Ko Chang

Not to be confused with the much larger island of Ko Chang on Thailand's east coast (see p.235), Ranong's **KO CHANG** (Ⓦwww.kohchang-ranong.com) is a forested little island about 5km offshore, with less than perfect greyish-yellow-sand beaches but a charmingly low-key atmosphere. The beaches are connected by tracks through the trees; there are no cars (just a few motorbikes) and, for the moment at least, only sporadic, self-generated supplies of electricity. Most islanders make their living from fishing and from the rubber, palm and cashew-nut plantations that dominate the flatter patches of the interior. The pace of life on Ko Chang is very slow, and for the relatively small number of tourists who make it here the emphasis is strongly on kicking back and chilling out – bring your own hammock and you'll fit right in. Nearly all the bungalows on Ko Chang **close** down from about mid-May until mid- or late October, when the island is



KO CHANG

Ranong
N
Sea Eagle
Ao Ko
Ko Plai
Ko Bonsai
Army Base
Aladdin Dive Safari
Rainy-season Pier
Ao Yai
Wat Pah Ko Chang
Minimarket
Minimarket
Ao Chao Ley
373m
Saphan Hin
Ao Daddaeng
Ao Kai Tao
National Park Ranger Station
Ao Lek
Ao Siad (Ao Lek)
0 approximate scale 1 km
Ko Phayam
Ranong
A
B
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RESTAURANT

Sunshine Restaurant	1

ACCOMMODATION

Cashew Resort	D
Chang Tong	G
Full Moon	J
Golden Bee	F
Hornbill	A
Ko Chang Contex	B
Ko Chang Resort	I
Lae Tawan	M
Little Italy	E
Mama's Bungalows	N
N&X	O
Nature View Bungalows	L
Sabay Yai	H
Sawasdee	K
Sunset Bungalows	C

subjected to very heavy rain; many bungalow staff relocate to the mainland for this period, so you should phone ahead to check first.

The best of Ko Chang's beaches are on the west coast, and of these the longest, nicest and most popular is **Ao Yai**. A narrow concrete road connects central Ao Yai with a mangrove-filled little harbour on the east coast, a distance of around 1700m that can be walked in under half an hour. The western end of the road begins beside the island's only temple, **Wat Pah Ko Chang**, whose bot and monks' quarters are partially hidden amongst the trees beside the beach, with a sign that asks tourists to dress modestly when in the area and not to swim or sunbathe in front of it. About halfway between the two coasts, a crossroads marks Ko Chang's only **village**, a tiny settlement that is home to most of the islanders and holds just a few shops, restaurants and a clinic. Signs at the *Sunshine Restaurant* crossroads direct you south to Saphan Hin (3km) and Ao Lek (5km); follow the unsigned northern route for a concrete path to the northern pier (used by boats during the wet season).

Ao Yai and Ao Daddaeng

Effectively divided in two by a khlong, the main cross-island track, and the stumps of a long wooden pier, **AO YAI** enjoys a fine view of the brooding silhouette of Burma's St Matthew's Island, which dominates the western horizon. The 800-metre-long stretch of Ao Yai that runs north from the khlong is the most attractive on the island, nice and wide even at high tide, and especially popular with kids. South of the khlong, the beach is very narrow at high tide, but when the water goes out you have to walk a longish distance to find any depth. Southern Ao Yai, which begins just beyond the rocky divide occupied by *Ko Chang Resort*, has greyish sand but is fine for swimming. Further south still, around an impassable rocky headland, tiny secluded gold-sand **Ao Daddaeng** (Tadang) is sandwiched between massive boulders and holds just a few bungalows: reach it via a five-minute footpath from behind *Tadang Bay*.

The rest of the island

A 25-minute walk **north of Ao Yai**, following the track behind *Sunset*, brings you to the first of a series of little bays, each of which is occupied by just one set of bungalows. The bays are secluded and feel quite remote, accessible only via a track that takes you through forest and rubber plantations with just one house en route. On the way, about 10 minutes' walk north of *Sunset*, at the top of the hill (currently the most reliable place on the island to get a mobile phone signal), you'll pass the barbed-wire perimeters of a military camp, established here to monitor activity along the (maritime) Thai-Burmese border.

Ao Siad, at the southern end of the island, is even more isolated, though there are several bungalow outfits fronting the sandy shore here. It's sometimes known as Ao Lek, though the real **Ao Lek** is the mangrove-lined bay 15 minutes' walk to the northeast, on the other coast. The Ranong–Ko Phayam boat service makes a stop off Ao Siad (Ranong–Ko Chang boats do not; see p.362 for details), but to get anywhere else you'll need to negotiate a ride in a longtail if staying here. The alternative is to walk, either from Ao Daddaeng or from the village. From Ao Daddaeng, a clear path takes you south, in about an hour, to **Ao Kai Tao**, a pretty beach and site of the national park ranger station. From Ao Kai Tao the route then follows an indistinct path across the saddle between two hills and along a creek bed to reach east-coast Ao Lek (this takes another hour), after which it's 15 minutes south to Ao Siad. Coming from the village, you follow the signed track from the *Sunshine Restaurant* crossroads south to Ao Lek and then on to Ao Siad; it's 5km and should take about two hours.

Practicalities

Boats to Ko Chang leave from the Ko Phayam Pier in **Saphan Pla**, 5km south of Ranong's town centre. Several different **songthaew** services connect Ranong and Saphan Pla: from the town centre's Thanon Ruangrat market, the fastest and most direct songthaew is the red #3 (20min; B10–15); the un-numbered blue ones, which also serve the bus station, follow a circuitous route that can take up to 45mins and usually charge B20. You'll probably be dropped on the main road through Saphan Pla, from where it's about 500m to the pier and its coffee shop, minimarket and Internet access. Some accommodation-booking agents in Ranong offer free transport to the pier for their customers.

At the time of writing there were scheduled daily **boat departures** to Ko Chang's Ao Yai beach at 9.30am, noon and 2pm, with an occasional 3.30pm service added in peak season; ask at Ranong information centres for the latest info. If there are more than six in your party, you can probably charter your own boat almost immediately. The journey takes about an hour and costs B140 per person; you'll be dropped as close as possible to your intended bungalow. If heading for Saphan Hin or Ao Siad, you'll probably be put on the Ko Phayam boat (see p.365), which stops off at both those beaches en route. If you're travelling to Ko Chang **from Ko Phayam** and want to stay on Ao Yai, it's generally simpler, though more expensive, to take the boat back to Saphan Pla on the mainland and start again, as it's a long hot walk to Ao Yai from Ao Lek and Saphan Hin. The alternative would be to charter a boat from Ko Phayam to Ko Chang (about B800–1000). Very few boats travel to Ko Chang during the **rainy months** of June to October, and those that do drop passengers on the island's east coast, a three-kilometre walk from Ao Yai. During the tourist season, there's at least one boat a day from Ko Chang **back to Saphan Pla**, generally in the morning between about 7am and 9am, and another one at 2pm – ask at your bungalows the day before.

To date there is very little commercial activity on Ko Chang, save for a few local **minimarkets** selling basic necessities: at *Golden Bee* and behind the khlong on Ao Yai, and at *Sunshine Restaurant* beside the crossroads in the heart of the island. The crossroads is also where you'll find the island **clinic**. **Overseas phone calls** can be made at *Cashew Resort* and they can also arrange bus tickets, Ranong–Bangkok flights, and speedboat charters to Ranong (20min; B3000 for up to six people). There is **Internet** access at *Sea Eagle*, north of Ao Yai.

The German-Dutch-run **dive shop** Aladdin Dive Safari (Ⓣ077 820472, and at Ko Chang boat pier in Ranong Ⓣ077 813698, Ⓦwww.aladdindivesafari.com) is based next to *Cashew Resort* and from late October through mid-May teaches PADI dive courses and runs live-aboards to Ko Similan, Richlieu Rock, Ko Bon and Ko Tachai (4 days; B14,900), to Ko Surin and Ko Tachai (3 days; B13,900), and to the Mergui Archipelago.

Accommodation and eating

Most of the **bungalow** operations are simple wooden-plank or woven bamboo constructions, comprising just a dozen huts and a small restaurant each. Though they nearly all have their own generators (which usually only operate in the evenings), it's a good idea to bring a torch as some bungalow managers bow to customers' preference to stick to candles and paraffin lamps. Due to limited Internet access on the island, few bungalow owners check their email more than once a fortnight during high season, more frequently in low season. Except where stated, all bungalows listed here **close** down from about mid-May until early or mid-October.

Bungalow restaurants tend to serve a broadly similar menu of travellers' **food**. Those that stand out include *Cashew Resort* for its fresh bread; *Sawasdee* for its fish with tamarind sauce and its massaman curries; and *Mama's* for its huge breakfasts and home-cooked south-German specialities. Italian-run *Little Italy* serves authentic sauces with its spaghetti dishes.

Ao Yai

Cashew Resort Ⓣ077 820116. The longest-running set of bungalows on the island, and also the largest, with 35 bungalows along 700m of beachfront land, this place is nicely spread out among the cashew trees, giving all bungalows both a sea view and some privacy. Bungalows come in various styles, in either wood or brick, and some have proper glass windows. The resort offers the most facilities on the island, including foreign exchange, Visa and Mastercard capability, an overseas phone service (with Internet service planned), and a pool table. ②–③

Chang Tong Ⓣ077 820178. Simple, clean wood and bamboo bungalows, well spaced in two rows. All have mosquito nets. ①–②

Full Moon Ⓣ077 820130, Ⓔfamilymoon99@hotmail.com. Offers very cheap huts with shared bathrooms at the back of the shore, plus a range of bamboo and wooden en-suite bungalows on the beachfront, and some larger bungalows for up to five people. Bungalows are lamp-lit at night. ①–④

Golden Bee Ⓣ087 889 9613. Set among the palm trees, the wooden huts here come in various styles; though interiors are simply designed, they are en suite. Open all year. ①–②

Ko Chang Resort Ⓣ077 820176, Ⓔsound_of_sea@lycos.com. Occupying a fabulous spot high on the rocks right over the water, the en-suite wooden bungalows here have fine sea views from their balconies and are simply but intelligently designed inside. The bamboo ones are set further back beside the path. The swimmable beach is just a couple of minutes' scramble to south or north. ②

Little Italy Ⓔdaniel060863@yahoo.it. A tiny outfit of just two attractive bungalows set in a secluded spot amongst the trees 300m inland from the temple, behind the Italian restaurant. Bungalows are two storeys, with exceptionally clean, smartly tiled and well-appointed bathrooms downstairs and Thai-style wooden-walled sleeping quarters upstairs, with big decks. ③–④

Nature View Bungalows Ⓔkornelis@mail.com. Occupying a fine elevated position, with views right up the beach, this Canadian-Thai-run place comprises just four huge bungalows, all of them with big glass windows and en-suite bathrooms. The bungalows are lit by paraffin lamps, but elsewhere everything's run on solar and wind-powered energy. ②

Sabay Yai Ⓣ086 278 4112. Sturdy, spacious wooden bungalows, widely spaced among shorefront trees, some of them big enough for families. ①–③

Sawasdee Ⓣ077 820177, Ⓔsawasdeekohchang@yahoo.com. Welcoming place with nine nicely designed wooden bungalows, in various styles and sizes but all of them with exceptionally good bathrooms (tiled floors, colour-washed walls, sinks and showers). Also has a couple of quite elegant seating and eating areas out front. ②–③

Sunset Bungalows Ⓣ077 820171. Very popular, laid-back, cosy outfit that's set in a rather dark grove of cashew-nut trees on the edge of the beach, comprising 16 huts with or without attached bathrooms, the priciest with beach view. ①–③

The rest of the island

Hornbill North around two headlands from Ao Yai, about 45 minutes' walk through forest and rubber plantation Ⓣ077 820134. Tiny place of just eight unobtrusive en-suite bungalows constructed to different designs and set amongst the trees behind their own little gold-sand bay. Lives up to its name, as majestic black-and-white hornbills are a common sight here. ①–②

Koh Chang Contex About a 25min walk over the hill from *Sunset* and northern Ao Yai Ⓣ077 820118, Ⓔcontexkohchang@hotmail.com. Located in its own peaceful little bay, which is good for snorkelling and fine for swimming except at low tide, this place has fifteen huts, both with and without private bathrooms, scattered across the rocks in a garden just above the beach. ①–②

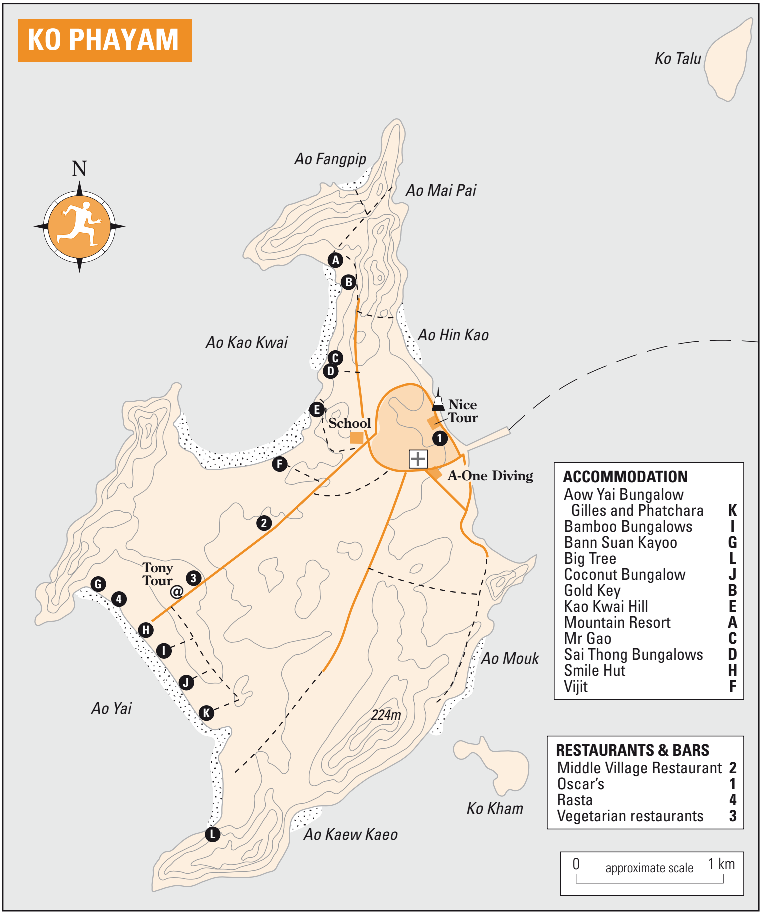
Lae Tawan Five minutes' walk south over the headland from Ao Yai, on Ao Daddaeng Ⓣ077 820179. The fifteen simple en-suite bungalows here share the small bay with just a couple of other bungalow outfits and enjoy good sunset views. It's open all year but you should expect "family-style" (rudimentary) service and food during the rainy season. ①–②

Mama's Bungalows South over the headland from Ao Yai, on Ao Daddaeng Ⓣ077 820180, Ⓔmamasbungalows@yahoo.com. The ten attractive, well maintained bungalows here come in two sizes, all of them with decent bathrooms. They're built in a pretty flower garden atop a rocky outcrop that overlooks the bay and affords fine views of St Matthew's Island. The restaurant serves generous portions of good food, including many German specialities. ②

N&X Ten minutes' walk south of Ao Siad and at least a two-hour walk from either Ao Daddaeng or from the inland village ☎077 825752. Occupying its own tiny bay, isolated even from remote Ao Siad, this place offers ten good bungalows ranged up the shorefront hillside. ①–②

Ko Phayam

The diminutive kangaroo-shaped island of **KO PHAYAM** offers fine white-sand beaches and coral reefs and is home to around five hundred people, most of whom either make their living from prawn, squid and crab fishing, or from growing cashew nuts, *sator* beans, coconut palms and rubber trees. Many islanders live in Ko Phayam's only **village**, on the northeast coast, which comprises a pier, a temple and about two dozen shops and businesses and connects to other corners of the island by a network of concrete roads and muddy tracks. A motorbike taxi service plies the more popular routes, including to the main beaches and accommodation


KO PHAYAM
N
Ko Talu
Ao Fangpip
Ao Mai Pai
Ao Hin Kao
Ao Kao Kwai
School
Nice Tour
A-One Diving
Ranong
Tony Tour
Ao Yai
Ao Mouk
224m
Ko Kham
Ao Kaew Kaeo
ACCOMMODATION
Aow Yai Bungalow Gilles and Phatchara K
Bamboo Bungalows I
Bann Suan Kayoo G
Big Tree L
Coconut Bungalow J
Gold Key B
Kao Kwai Hill E
Mountain Resort A
Mr Gao C
Sai Thong Bungalows D
Smile Hut H
Vijit F
RESTAURANTS & BARS
Middle Village Restaurant 2
Oscar's 1
Rasta 4
Vegetarian restaurants 3
0 approximate scale 1 km
A
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centres of **Ao Yai** and **Ao Kao Kwai**, but no journey is very great as the island measures just four by seven kilometres at its widest points. Because of the roads, Ko Phayam has a slightly more developed feel to it than neighbouring Ko Chang, underlined by a fledgling though still very low-key bar scene, and the presence of a significant number of foreigners who choose to spend six or more months here every year. Some expats even take up the rainy-season challenge, staying on through the downpours and rough seas that lash the island from June to October, but a number of bungalows close down during this time. As the island gets more popular, residents and expats are beginning to try and forestall the inevitable negative impact on the island's **environment**. In particular they are urging visitors not to accept plastic bags from the few shops on the island, to take non-degradable rubbish such as batteries and plastic items back to the mainland, and to minimize plastic water-bottle usage by buying the biggest possible bottles or better still creating a demand for a water-refill service.

Around the island

Ko Phayam's nicest beach is the three-kilometre-long **Ao Yai** on the southwest coast, a beautiful long sweep of soft white sand that curves quite deeply at its northern and southern ends into rocky outcrops that offer some snorkelling possibilities. The shore is pounded by decent waves that are fun for boogie-boarding and pretty safe; the sunsets are quite spectacular here too. For the moment Ao Yai's bungalow operations are still widely spaced along the shoreline, and much of the forest behind the beach is still intact. You're more than likely to see – and hear – some of the resident black-and-white hornbills at dawn and dusk, and sightings of crab-eating macaques and white-bellied sea eagles are also very possible. The main seven-kilometre-long route from Ao Yai to the village, which starts from behind *Smile Hut*, is very pleasant, whether done on foot, by bicycle (the concrete road undulates a lot but there are no insurmountable hills so it takes around 30 minutes), or motorbike; it runs through almost unadulterated cashew plantations, dotted with the occasional house.

The northwest coast is scalloped into **Ao Kao Kwai**, a name that's pronounced locally as **Ao Kao Fai** and translates as **Buffalo Bay**; if you stand on the cliff midway along the bay you'll appreciate how it got its name, as the two halves of the beach curve out into buffalo-like horns. The southern half of Ao Kao Kwai is subject to both very low and very high tides, which makes it unreliable for swimming, but the northern stretch, from *Sai Thong* and *Mr Gao* bungalows and beyond, is pretty, with appealing golden sand, decent swimming at any tide, and none of the big waves that characterize Ao Yai. The entire beach affords impressive views of the enormous hilly profile of Burma's St Matthew's Island.

North of *Mountain Resort* at the northern end of Ao Kao Kwai, a thirty-minute walk brings you to the pretty little sandy beach at **Ao Fangpip** (also spelt Ao Kwang Pib), which is good for snorkelling. There's also some snorkellable reef at **Ao Hin Kao** on the northeast coast.

Practicalities

From November to May there's at least one daily **boat** to Ko Phayam from the Ko Phayam Pier in Ranong's port area, Saphan Pla, 5km south of Ranong's town centre; it departs at 9.30am and takes two to three hours to reach the village pier on the east coast (B150). There should also be another boat at about 2pm, but check with the information centres in Ranong. There's also a speedboat service, departing at 10am and 2.30pm, which can be booked through *Coffee Shop* in Ranong, takes about 40 minutes and costs B350 per person. To get to the Ko Phayam Pier from Ranong you can take any **songthaew** bound for **Saphan Pla** from either the Thanon Ruangrat market or from the bus station: the fastest and most direct songthaew is the red #3 from Thanon Ruangrat (20min; B10–15); the un-numbered blue ones, which also serve the bus station, follow a more roundabout route (45min; B20). Songthaews usually drop passengers on the main road through Saphan Pla, from where it's about 500m to the Ko Phayam Pier, where you'll also find a coffee shop, minimarket and Internet access. Some accommodation-booking agents in Ranong offer free transport to the pier for their customers. The boat **returns from Ko Phayam** to Saphan Pla at about 8.30am and there should be another departure at 2pm; speedboats return at 9am and 1pm. You can also charter a speedboat from *Oscar's* bar in the village (B3000 to Ranong or B2500 to Ranong's airport pier) or a longtail from nearby Nice Tour and Travel (B800–1000 to Ko Chang; 45 min). Boats are less regular during the rainy season, from June to October, when many bungalows close, so call ahead during this period to check first.

There are no cars on the island, and the main mode of transport is motorbikes. **Motorbike taxis** always meet incoming boats at the pier and should be easy enough to find in Ko Phayam village; on the beaches, contact staff at your bungalow. The going rate for a ride between the village and the beaches is B80. The other option is to rent a motorbike in the village or through your bungalow for B150–200 per day. You should also be able to find a bicycle for rent, try the shops just inland from Ao Yai, or ask in the village. Many travellers heading into the village from one of the beaches opt to **walk** at least one way: from Ao Yai it's an enjoyable seven-kilometre stroll along the narrow and fairly shady concrete road, with the possibility of stopping for a breather at the aptly named *Middle Village Restaurant*; from southern Ao Kao Kwai to the village takes less than an hour.

The **village** has just enough to cater to travellers' needs, including a few tiny general stores, a 24-hour minimarket, a couple of small restaurants and a **clinic**. Most mobile phones can get a signal in the village but not elsewhere on the island. *Oscar's* bar (see opposite), which is just north of the pier-head, is a good source of island **information**, rents motorbikes and takes people wakeboarding in the village bay. A couple of doors further along, the **tour agent** Nice Tour and Travel (ⓣ077 828093, ⓦwww.koyphayamisland.com) changes money and does Visa cash advance, has large-scale maps of the island, sells bus, train and airline tickets, can arrange boat hire and fishing tours from the island (B2500), and offers Internet access (B3/minute) and an **international phone** service; it also sells creative Nepalese clothing and handicrafts. A-One Diving (ⓣ077 824303, ⓦwww.a-one-diving.com), on the road to the pier, teaches PADI **dive** courses and runs live-aboards to Ko Surin, Richelieu Rock, Ko Tachai, Ko Bon and Ko Similan (from B12,000 for three days) and to Burma Banks and the Mergui archipelago (from B34,000 for five days). *Mr Gao* on Ao Kao Kwai (ⓣ077 823995) runs two-day **snorkelling** trips to Ko Surin at B3500 per person: transport is by speedboat and the price includes food, a round-archipelago tour, and accommodation in national park tents.

Elsewhere on the island, there is **Internet access** at some bungalows on both beaches, as well as at Tony Tour, 200m inland from Ao Yai's *Smile Hut*, which also sells bus and train tickets (ⓣ077 820082, ⓔtonytour_kohpayam@yahoo.com); there's a minimarket nearby too.

Accommodation, eating and drinking

The best of Ko Phayam's **accommodation** is found on the two main beaches, Ao Yai and Ao Kao Kwai. Unless otherwise stated all bungalows close down during the wet season, from June to October. Every set of bungalows has a **restaurant**, and there are several others away from the two beaches, including, 200m inland along the road from Ao Yai's *Smile Hut*, a couple of laid-back vegetarian restaurants (Mon–Sat 8am–5pm), serving home-made bread, cakes, daily specials and pastas; and *Middle Village Restaurant*, on the Ao Yai–village road, which serves very cheap Thai food and drink. *Oscar's* (daily 7am–9pm), in the village, has no menu, serving anything from breakfasts to shepherds' pie, seafood to Indian curries, depending on availability, but it's most famous for its (mostly open-air) **bar**, which is the focal point of the expat social scene and makes an enjoyable place to while away an afternoon, as well as being a useful source of island information. Customers who stay late and can't get home are invited to crash out at the adjacent *Hangover Hut*. Several bungalow operations on Ao Yai, including the long-running *Rasta*, also run **beach bars** during high season (Dec–Feb).

Ao Yai

Aow Yai Bungalow Gilles and Phatchara Ⓣ077 821753, Ⓔgilles_phatchara@hotmail.com. Established by a French-Thai couple, this was the first set of bungalows on the island and remains one of the most popular, especially with return guests. The bungalows are dotted around an extensive garden of flowers, fruit trees and palms; each has its own washbasin inside, and only the very cheapest share bathrooms. Otherwise you're looking at a range of wood and concrete options, with price depending on size (some sleep four). During the rainy season it's best to email to check whether it's open. Shared bathroom ①, en suite ②–④

Bamboo Bungalows Ⓣ077 820012. The liveliest place to stay on the beach and many travellers' first port of call, with 28 bungalows set under the trees in a well-tended flower garden in the middle of the beach. They've been built with imaginative use of local materials and all but the cheapest have bathrooms and mosquito nets. At the top of the range, the appealing shell-studded concrete bungalows have verandas and characterful open-air bathrooms; other options include a choice of bamboo and wood huts, with price depending on size. *Bamboo* rents out boogie boards and offers Internet access, exchange and overseas phone services. It's run by an Israeli-Thai couple and stays opens year-round. Shared bathroom ①, en suite bamboo ②–③, shell bungalow ④

Bann Suan Kayoo Ⓣ077 820133, Ⓦwww.gopayam.com. Though the bungalows here are not the best value on the beach, there's a genuinely warm welcome from the island-family owners and the peaceful location at the far northern end of the bay appeals particularly to solo travellers looking for quiet. Choose between simple en-suite thatched bamboo huts or slightly sturdier ones with tin roofs and bigger decks, all of them set within a grassy shorefront garden with floral hedges. Closed May–Oct. ②–④

Big Tree Ⓣ077 820504. Another quiet spot, removed from the main action at the far southern end of the bay, and set near the eponymous tree and above a rocky point that offers some snorkelling. The seven bamboo and wood bungalows are a good size, with price depending on size and location, though nearly all of them have a direct sea view. It's popular with long stayers so phone ahead. ②–③

Coconut Bungalow Ⓣ077 820011, Ⓔcoconut_phayamisland@thaimail.com. Occupying a great spot in the centre of the bay and run by a Ko Phayam family, this good-value place offers a range of 25 high-standard bungalows, from small bamboo en-suite huts through larger wood or bamboo versions to big concrete bungalows at the top end. ②–④

Smile Hut Ⓣ077 820335, Ⓦwww.designparty.com/member/4615710/smile_hut.html. Like *Bamboo*, this is a lively place and very popular with travellers. It comprises around 30 simple en-suite bamboo huts, many of them spread among the shoreline trees, with the slightly cheaper versions set one row behind. Phone to check whether they are open during the rainy season. ②–③

Ao Kao Kwai (Buffalo Bay)

Gold Key Ⓣ077 812202. Just a handful of nice, en-suite wooden bungalows in the central part of the northern bay, some of them with sea view, others located further back, behind the restaurant. ②–③

Kao Kwai Hill Ⓣ081 847 6285, Ⓦwww.kaokwaihill.com. Nine simple bamboo, wood and concrete bungalows set amongst the cashew and *sator* trees high up on the rocks, with easy access to the southern half of the beach but a rocky walk (possible at low-tide only) to the northern stretch. The attractively sited restaurant overlooks a pair of eye-catchingly eroded outcrops and affords perfect views of Ao Kao Kwai's eponymous "buffalo horn" layout; you can also access the Internet here. ②

Mountain Resort Ⓣ077 820098. Managed by a welcoming family, the five bungalows here are small but comfortable, and all are en suite and have screened doors. They're set in a pretty garden at the peaceful, northernmost end of the beach, under palms and among bougainvillea and hibiscus. The concrete road runs out about 1km south of *Mountain Resort*, so the last stretch is via a potholed dirt track (or you can walk that bit via the beach instead). Open all year. ③

Mr Gao ⓣ077 823995, ⓦwww.mr-gao-phayam.com. Located on the best stretch of the beach, this is one of the most famous and popular spots, a well-established operation comprising just eight well-designed bungalows, in assorted sizes and luxury, set in a lovingly tended garden of shrubs and bamboos. All have bathrooms and most have polished wood floors, screened windows and thoughtfully furnished interiors. Mr Gao runs overnight trips to the Surin islands (see p.371) as well as fishing and snorkelling outings to other parts of Ko Phayam. There is Internet access here and the place is open all year. It's popular, so reserve ahead. ②–④

Sai Thong Bungalows ⓣ077 820466, ⓔjutharat_1980@yahoo.com. Friendly, local setup that shares the same pretty stretch of beach with Mr Gao and has just five good-quality rattan huts, each furnished with a thick mattress, a mosquito net and its own well-appointed bathroom. ②–③

Vijit ⓣ077 834082, ⓔvijitbungalows@hotmail.com. This long-running outfit is the most commercial on Ao Kao Kwai and very popular, despite occupying the part of the beach whose tides make it the least reliable for swimming. It's bungalows are spacious and en suite and the price mainly depends on the proximity to the shorefront. Open all year. ②–④

Khuraburi and Ko Surin

The small town of **Khuraburi**, 110km south of Ranong on Highway 4, is the main departure point for the magnificent national park island chain of **Ko Surin**, a group of five small islands around 60km offshore, just inside Thai waters. Much closer to Khuraburi are the islands of **Ko Ra** and **Ko Phra Thong**, which offer empty beaches and decent snorkelling and bird-watching.

Khuraburi and around

Most travellers use the town of **KHURABURI** as a staging post en route to or from the Surin islands: the main pier for boats to the islands is just 7.5km away, and Khuraburi's tour agents sell boat tickets and offer transport to the pier, plus there is accommodation in town. Though lacking in famous attractions, the local area is nonetheless scenic, both offshore and inland: with an afternoon or more to spare, you could either rent a motorbike, mountain bike or kayak to explore it independently, or charter a motorbike taxi or longtail boat. There is also a community-based tourism initiative in the area, Andaman Discoveries (ⓦwww.andamandiscoveries.com), which runs a **homestay programme**. It was founded after the tsunami by the NGO North Andaman Tsunami Relief (NATR; ⓣ087 917 7165, ⓦwww.northandamantsunamirelief.com) to help the area's many devastated fishing communities get back on their feet. A typical three-day package, including accommodation, home-cooked meals, and fishing, trekking and cultural tours, costs B3000: check the website for detailed info or, locally, ask Jaeb at the bus station.

Chief among nearby maritime attractions are the **islands** of Ko Ra and Ko Phra Thong, both of them reached from the Khuraburi pier, either by chartered longtail (B2500 per day including snorkel gear and transfers from Khuraburi town) or, if you're feeling energetic, by self-powered kayak. Hilly, forested **KO RA** (measuring about 10km north to south and about 3km wide) sits just off Khuraburi pier's mangrove-lined estuary and has no permanent residents. Graced with intact rainforest full of towering trees, resident hornbills and empty gold-sand beaches, it makes an enticing prospect for a day's boat trip, with especially pretty beaches and reefs along its west-facing coasts (about 1hr by longtail), though you'll need a guide to explore the interior. You can also kayak around to its western coast in about two hours from Khuraburi pier (ask at the bus station for a map), but check tide conditions locally first, and be warned that currents in the channel between southern Ko Ra and Ko Phra Thong are treacherous, so it's risky to attempt an entire circuit. Immediately to the south of Ko Ra, about one kilometre off the Khuraburi coast, **KO PHRA THONG** (Golden Buddha Island) also has some lovely beaches, the nicest of which, on the west coast, is 10km long and blessed with fine gold sand. This is the site of the *Golden Buddha Beach Resort* (Ⓣ081 894 7195, Ⓦwww.goldenbuddhaisland.com; ⑦–⑧), an ecologically minded resort 90 minutes' boat ride from the pier that comprises nineteen idiosyncratic, two-storey wooden houses, all of them with fans, mosquito nets and open-air bathrooms as well as downstairs kitchens. Food is served buffet-style in the dining area (B490/person/day). The resort hosts yoga retreats and a turtle conservation project run by the Italian Naucrates (Ⓦwww.naucrates.org) and is open year-round. Ko Phra Thong used also to be home to three thriving fishing villages, but the island was very badly hit by the 2004 tsunami, as a result of which many lives were lost and the settlements decimated. Rebuilding will take some years, and in the meantime most villagers have been relocated to the Khuraburi mainland.

Inland Khuraburi offers several possibilities for a scenic ride on a bicycle (or motorbike). Jaeb at the bus station can supply sketch-maps of a 20-kilometre circular **cycle route** along rural, mildly undulating back roads to a small dam and swimming spot in the river, with optional off-road cycle tracks through the surrounding forest. The route begins by heading east towards the Khao Phra Mee hills, along the side road that starts north of the town-centre bridge and *Tararin* bungalows, taking you through rubber and oil-palm plantations, past fields of watermelon (Nov–Jan), and to the Khura River dam; backtracking a little you then return via some small hamlets and the prettiest, residential part of Khuraburi itself, arriving back in the town centre 100m south of the bus station.

Practicalities

The commercial heart of Khuraburi is a 500-metre strip of shops and businesses either side of Highway 4. Most **buses** travelling along Highway 4 between Bangkok/Chumphon/Ranong and Takua Pa/Khao Lak/Phuket stop here, either outside or across from the tiny bus-station office on the east side of the road. The bus station's helpful English-speaking manager, Jaeb, is a great source of **information** on the area and can supply a **map** showing local mountain-biking, kayaking and hiking routes. Tom Tour, across the road (Ⓣ086 272 0588, Ⓔtom_tammarat@yahoo.co.th), rents bicycles (B80) and motorbikes (B200), as well as **tents** (B100/day), sleeping bags (B50/day) and snorkel sets (B50/day). *Boon Piya Resort* (see below) rents **kayaks** as well as motorbikes and mountain bikes and can arrange snorkelling trips to Ko Ra and Ko Phra Thong. Many places in town sell **boat tickets to Ko Surin**, including all the above-listed outlets; see p.372 for boat times and prices.

There are several **places to stay** in and around Khuraburi. Set alongside the river at the northern end of town, about 250m north of the bus station, *Tararin* (Ⓣ076 491789; fan ②, air-con ④) is a cute, rustic-style place with just a handful of simple but characterful en-suite wooden and concrete bungalows overlooking the water, plus an attractive riverside restaurant and eating deck. The pristine concrete bungalows at the motel-style *Boon Piya Resort* (Ⓣ081 752 5457; ④), 150m north of the bus station, are better appointed, if rather tightly packed, and all have air-con and powerful showers; they're the usual choice of sales reps and NGOs. The poshest accommodation in the area is at *Khuraburi Greenview Resort* (Ⓣ076 421360, Ⓦwww.kuraburigreenview.co.th; ⑦), 12km south of Khuraburi, beneath a range of forested hills alongside Highway 4, at kilometre-stone 739. The attractively designed wooden chalets all have air-con, TV and use of the swimming pool, and the hotel sells tickets for speedboats to Ko Surin and can provide transfers to the pier. You can also stay with a family in a traditional fishing village near Khuraburi as part of the NATR homestay programme described on p.368, on a bed and breakfast basis (② excluding meals); Jaeb at the bus station is the contact point for arranging this, though dates need to be booked at least two days in advance.

At night, most people **eat** at the night market next to bus station, where the roti stall is a particular favourite, flipping out a constant pile of sizzling *roti mataba* (chicken) and *roti kluay* (banana). The morning market (daily from 5am) across from *Boon Piya* is the place to stock up on food for the Surin Islands but the best place for fresh coffee is next door but one to *Boon Piya* at the *Friends de Sea* **Internet** café (daily 8am–9pm).

Ko Surin

The spectacular shallow reefs around **KO SURIN** National Park (open from 16 Nov to 16 May; ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp; B200 entry) offer some of the best snorkelling and diving on the Andaman coast. The most beautiful and easily explored of the reefs are those surrounding the two main islands in the group, Ko Surin Nua (north) and Ko Surin Tai (south), which are separated only by a narrow channel. **SURIN NUA**, slightly the larger at about 5km across, holds the national park headquarters, visitor centre and park accommodation, as well as an interpretative trail and a turtle hatchery. The water is so clear here, and the

The chao ley: Moken and Urak Lawoy

Sometimes called sea gypsies, the **chao ley** or *chao nam* ("people of the sea" or "water people") have been living off the seas around the west coast of the Malay peninsula for hundreds of years. Some still pursue a traditional nomadic existence, living in self-contained houseboats known as **kabang**, but many have now made permanent homes in Andaman coast settlements in Thailand, Burma and Malaysia. Dark-skinned and sometimes with an auburn tinge to their hair, the *chao ley* of the Andaman Sea are thought to number around five thousand, divided into five groups, with distinct lifestyles and dialects.

Of the different groups, the **Urak Lawoy**, who have settled on the islands of Ko Lanta (see p.480), Ko Jum (see p.462), Ko Phi Phi (see p.459), Phuket (see p.417) and Ko Lipe (see p.508), are the most integrated into Thai society. They came north to Thailand from Malaysia around 200 years ago (having possibly migrated from the Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean some two centuries prior) and are known as *Mai Thai*, or "New Thai". Thailand's Urak Lawoy have been recognized as Thai citizens since the 1960s, when the queen mother granted them five family names, thereby enabling them to possess ID cards and go to school. Many have found work on coconut plantations or as fishermen, while others continue in the more traditional *chao ley* **occupations** of hunting for pearls and seashells on the ocean floor, attaching stones to their waists to dive to depths of 60m with only an air-hose connecting them to the surface; sometimes they fish in this way too, taking down enormous nets into which they herd the fish as they walk along the sea bed. Their agility and courage make them good birds'-nesters as well (see box on p.460), enabling them to harvest the tiny nests of sea swifts from nooks and crannies hundreds of metres high inside caves along the Andaman coast.

The **Moken** of Thailand's Ko Surin islands and Burma's Mergui archipelago probably came originally from Burma and are the most traditional of the *chao ley* communities. They still lead remote, itinerant lives, are mostly unregistered as Thai citizens, and own no land or property, but are dependent on fresh water and beaches to reefs so close to the surface, that you can make out a forest of sea anemones while sitting in a boat just 10m from the park headquarters' beach. Visibility off the east and west coasts of both islands stretches to a depth of 40m.

Across the channel, **SURIN TAI** is the long-established home of a community of Moken *chao ley* (see box) who divide their time between boat-building and fishing. Although their settlements were destroyed in the 2004 tsunami, they have since built new homes on the island. Every April, as part of the Songkhran New Year festivities, *chao ley* from nearby islands (including those in Burmese waters) congregate here to celebrate with a ceremony involving, among other rites, the release into the sea of several hundred turtles, which are a symbol of longevity and especially precious to Thai and Chinese people.

Practicalities

Because the islands are so far out at sea, Ko Surin is closed to visitors from May 17 to Nov 16, when monsoon weather renders the sixty-kilometre trip a potentially suicidal undertaking. During the rest of the year, the majority of visitors either join **snorkelling day trips** to the islands from Khuraburi (see p.368), Phuket (see p.408), or Phang Nga (see p.426), or opt for live-aboard **dive trips** out of Khao Lak (see p.382), Phuket (see p.408), Ranong (see p.355), Ko Chang (see p.362) or Ko Phayam (see p.366). Many of these trips also feature other remote reefs such as Richelieu Rock or the Burma Banks and cost from B12,000 for three days; *Mr Gao* on Ko Phayam runs overnight snorkelling trips to Ko Surin at B3500 per person (see p.366).

collect shells and sea slugs to sell to Thai traders. They have extensive knowledge of the plants that grow in the remaining jungles on Thailand's west-coast islands, using eighty different species for food alone, and thirty for medicinal purposes.

The *chao ley* are **animists**, with a strong connection both to the natural spirits of island and sea and to their own ancestral spirits. On some beaches they set up totem poles as a contact point between the spirits, their ancestors and their shaman. The sea gypsies have a rich **musical heritage** too. The Moken do not use any instruments as such, making do with found objects for percussion; the Urak Lawoy on the other hand, due to their closer proximity to the Thai and Malay cultures, are excellent violin- and drum-players. During community entertainments such as the Urak Lawoy's twice-yearly full-moon **festivals** on Ko Lanta (see p.480), the male musicians form a semicircle around the old women, who dance and sing about the sea, the jungle and their families.

Building a new boat is the ultimate expression of what it is to be a *chao ley*, and tradition holds that every newly married couple has a *kabang* built for them. But the complex art of constructing a seaworthy home from a single tree trunk, and the way of life it represents, is disappearing. In Thailand, where **assimilation** is actively promoted by the government, the truly nomadic flotillas have become increasingly marginalized, and the number of undeveloped islands they can visit unhindered gets smaller year by year. The 2004 tsunami further threatened their cultural integrity: when the waves destroyed the Moken's boats and homes on Ko Surin, they were obliged to take refuge on the mainland, where certain missionary NGOs blackmailed some into converting from their animist religion. Though the Moken have since returned to the Surin islands, inappropriate donations and the merging of two villages have exacerbated family rivalries and caused divisions that may prove lethal to their traditional way of life. For more information on Thailand's *chao ley* peoples, see the website of the Unesco-supported Andaman Pilot Project (Ⓦwww.cusri.chula.ac.th/andaman/en).

For independent travellers, the usual way to reach the islands is on one of the **boat services from Khuraburi**. Several agencies in Khuraburi (see p.369) sell tickets for both these boats and the price should include transport from Khuraburi to the pier, 7.5km northwest (private transport from town to the pier costs B100 by motorbike or B150 by taxi). Between mid-May and mid-November, there should be at least one **slow boat** a day (departs Khuraburi pier 9am; 2–3hr; B1100 rtn; returns from Ko Surin at 1pm) and, weather permitting, between January and April there's generally at least one **fast boat** service as well (departs Khuraburi pier 9am; 1hr; B1700 rtn; returns from Ko Surin at 2.30pm).

For **accommodation on Ko Surin**, you have the choice of renting one of the expensive national park **bungalows** on Surin Nua (⑦), renting a national park tent (B200–300/day), or bringing your own tent (available for hire from Khuraburi) and pitching it for B80 per day. Bungalows need to be booked in advance through the National Parks website at Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp, and tents should be reserved ahead by phoning the Ko Surin National Park office at either their Khuraburi pier office Ⓣ076 491378 or their Ko Surin office Ⓣ076 419028. Unless you take your own **food** to the islands (Khuraburi has a market and general stores), you'll be restricted to the meals served at the restaurant on Surin Nua.

Khao Sok National Park

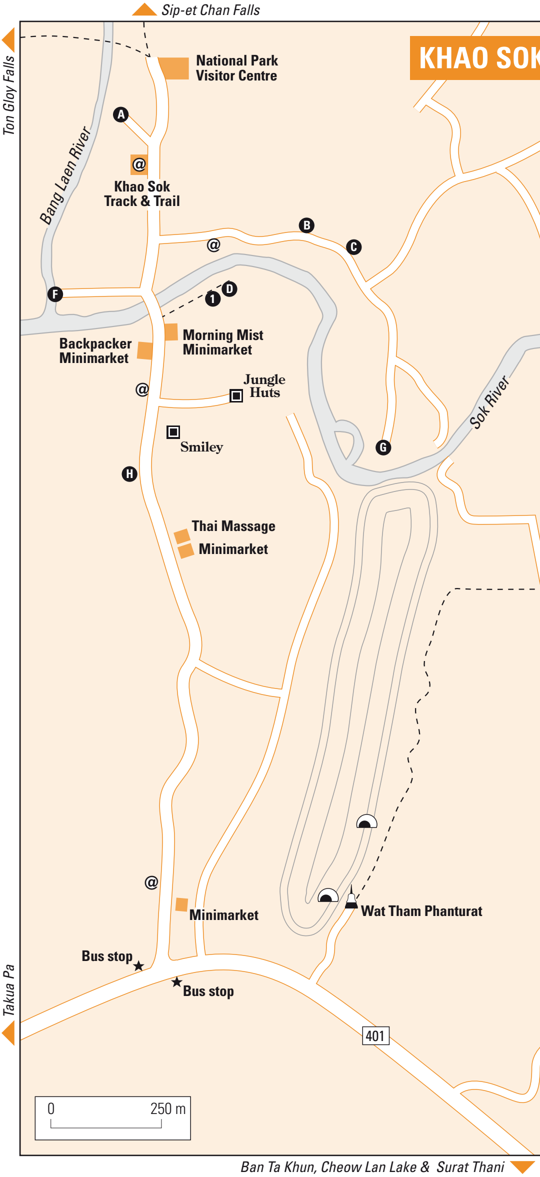
Most of the Andaman coast's attractions are found, unsurprisingly enough, along the shoreline, but the stunning jungle-clad karsts of **KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK** (Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp) are well worth heading inland for. Located about halfway between the southern peninsula's two coasts and easily accessible from Khao Lak, Phuket and Surat Thani, the park has become a popular stop on the travellers' route, offering a number of easy jungle **trails** as well as the chance to explore the enormous **Cheow Lan Lake** and its shoreside caves. Much of the park is carpeted in impenetrable rainforest, home to gaurs, leopard cats and tigers among others – and up to 155 species of bird. It protects the watershed of the Sok River, is dotted with dozens of waterfalls, and rises to a peak of nearly 1000m. The limestone crags that dominate almost every vista both on and off the lake are breathtaking, never more so than in the early morning: waking up to the sound of hooting gibbons and the sight of thick white mist curling around the karst formations is an experience not quickly forgotten.

Practicalities

The park has two centres: the **tourist village** that has grown up around the park visitor centre and trailheads, and the dam, 65km further east, at the head of **Cheow Lan Lake**. Most visitors stay in the tourist village and organize their lake trips from there, but it's also feasible to do one or more nights at the lake first.

Arrival and information

The main access road into the park takes you to the tourist village and trailheads. It starts at kilometre-stone 109 on Highway 401, which cuts east from the junction town of **Takua Pa**, 40km south of Khuraburi, and is the route taken by most Surat Thani-bound **buses** from Khao Lak and a few from Phuket. Buses run at least every ninety minutes in both directions and take less than an hour from Takua Pa, ninety minutes from Khao Lak, and two hours from Surat Thani; at the park entrance you'll be met by guest-house staff offering free lifts to their accommodation, the furthest of which is 3km from the main road. Coming by bus



KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK

Sip-et Chan Falls
Ton Gloy Falls
National Park Visitor Centre
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A
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Khao Sok Track & Trail
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Morning Mist Minimarket
Backpacker Minimarket
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Jungle Huts
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ACCOMMODATION
Art's Riverview Jungle Lodge G
Bamboo House B
Freedom Resort H
Khao Sok Rainforest Resort F
Morning Mist Resort D
Nung House C
Our Jungle House E
Treetops River Huts A
RESTAURANT
Misty Restaurant 1

from Bangkok, Hua Hin or Chumphon, take a Surat Thani-bound bus, but ask to be dropped off at the junction with the Takua Pa road, about 20km before Surat Thani, and then change onto a Takua Pa bus. If coming direct from Surat Thani, think twice about using the tourist **minibus** services to Khao Sok that leave at or after 3pm: many people have complained that, despite advertising a door-to-door service, these minibuses simply dump their passengers at an affiliated guest house on the Khao Sok access road, delaying their arrival until after dark. See below for transport services from Surat Thani train station direct to the lake. **Onward bus connections** from Khao Sok are frequent and guest-house staff will ferry you back to the main road, or you can make use of the various minibus services to the most popular destinations, including Krabi (2hr; B300), Surat Thani train station at Phunphin (1hr 45min; B250), Ko Samui (3hr; B430), Trang (4hr 30min; B520) and Penang (12hr; B750).

At the **tourist village** there are around twenty sets of bungalows, along with half a dozen minimarkets and email centres, laundry services and the all-important massage centres – a life-saver after a challenging jungle trek. Khao Sok Track & Trail does currency exchange (there's no ATM in Khao Sok), offers an international phone service and sells bus, boat, plane and train tickets. Several minimarkets and guest houses rent out **motorbikes** (B200/day)and Morning Mist minimarket also has a few **bicycles** for rent (B60/day).

Accommodation and eating

The longest-running and most peaceful of **guest houses** in the tourist village are situated down the side road that runs alongside the river; the newer ones are located along the road to the park checkpoint. For lake accommodation, see p.377. Nearly all the guest houses serve **food**: *Misty Restaurant* at *Morning Mist Resort* serves exceptionally tasty Thai dishes, including inventive spicy *yam* salads and fresh juices such as sapodilla and tamarind; they grow much of their own produce in the guest-house garden and the manager also runs cooking classes (B800).

Art's Riverview Jungle Lodge ☎086 282 2677, ⓦkrabidir.com/artsriverview-lodge. One of the longest-running and most popular places to stay in Khao Sok, with 20 bungalows nicely located away from the main fray, surrounded by jungle and mostly enjoying lovely river views. The cheaper bungalows are spacious, tastefully designed wooden affairs, with shutters and a deck; the deluxe versions are even bigger and attractively furnished, and there are treehouse-style ones as well, plus family-sized options. All rooms have fans and mosquito nets. Because of the location you really do fall asleep and wake to an orchestra of countless insects, birds, monkeys and other unidentifiable creatures. ④–⑥

Bamboo House ☎081 787 7484, ⓦkrabidir.com/bamboohouse/index.htm. One of the first guest houses in the park and run by members of the park warden's family, this place offers a range of options, from simple bamboo huts with attached bathrooms to stilted wooden huts, concrete versions, and a couple of treehouses. Also has a swimming platform in the river. ②–⑤

Freedom Resort ☎081 370 1620, ⓔfreedomresort@yahoo.com. Australian-managed place comprising ten sizeable bamboo and wooden houses on stilts, with verandas, most of which look straight into a patch of jungle. Rooms are simply furnished but all have en-suite bathrooms. The adjacent restaurant hosts regular barbecues. ②

Khao Sok Rainforest Resort ☎077 395135, ⓦkrabidir.com/khaosokrainforest/index.htm. This welcoming place has five spectacularly sited "mountain view" bungalows – set high on a jungle slope and affording unsurpassed karst views – plus eight other bungalows at ground level, overlooking the river. Interiors are decent enough if a bit faded and all rooms are en suite. ③–④

Morning Mist Resort ☎089 971 8794, ⓦwww.morningmistresort.com. Built within a gorgeously profuse riverside garden that's filled with carefully tended tropical blooms and a big herb garden whose produce is used in the restaurant and cooking school, this place offers ten large, immaculate rooms in variously styled bungalows, all with hot water and either river or garden view. It's well set up for families, with several rooms sleeping up to four people plus lots of space for kids to play in. ③–④, family rooms ⑤

Nung House ☎077 395147 ⓦwww.nunghouse.com. Friendly place run by the park warden's son and his family with fourteen huts set around a garden full of rambutan trees. Choose between simple bamboo constructions with en-suite facilities, brick and concrete bungalows, and treehouses. ②–③

Our Jungle House ☎089 909 6814, ⓦwww.ourjunglehouse.com. The most romantically located of Khao Sok's guest houses occupies a secluded riverside spot beneath the limestone cliffs, about a 15min walk beyond *Nung House*. You can choose between beautifully situated treehouses and private cabins by the river, or garden versions with equally great views. All of them are simply but elegantly designed wooden constructions, furnished with fans, mosquito nets and bathrooms. ④–⑤

Treetops River Huts ⓣ077 395143, ⓦkrabidir.com/treetopsriverhuts/index.htm. Located beside the river, very close to the visitor centre and trailheads, with a choice of 30 comfortable rooms ranging from simple bamboo huts with bathrooms through to en-suite wood or stone ones. ②–⑤

Guided treks and tours

Even though the signed park trails are straightforward and easy to navigate, it's well worth making at least one **guided trek** into the jungle, preferably one that goes off-trail. The best jungle guides will educate you in rudimentary jungle craft and open your eyes to a wealth of detail that you'd miss on your own, such as the claw marks left by a sun-bear scaling a tree in search of honey, and the medicinal plants used for malarial fevers and stomach upsets. If you're lucky you might even see the **rafflesia kerrii** in bloom. Officially classified as having the second-biggest flowers in the world, with a diameter of up to 80cm, this rather unprepossessing brown, cabbage-like plant unfurls its enormous russet-coloured petals at some point between December and March, having emitted a disgusting stink in order to attract its pollinator, the green-headed housefly.

Guided treks into the jungle interior can be arranged through most of Khao Sok's guest houses, but the most reputable and long-serving **guides** are to be booked via *Bamboo House*, *Nung House*, *Khao Sok Rainforest Resort* and *Treetops River Huts*. For between B400 and B600 per person (excluding national park entry), you can join a trek along the main park trails, usually to Ton Gloy waterfall or Sip-et Chan falls, or to a nearby cave; a tailor-made off-trail hike costs around B1000. A good quality guide will also enhance the Cheow Lan Lake experience, described on p.376.

Most guest houses also do **night safaris** along the main park trails, when you're fairly certain to see civets and might be lucky enough to see some of the park's rarer inhabitants, like elephants, tigers, clouded leopards and pony-sized black-and-white tapirs (B350–500 for 2hr or B600 for 4hr).

The **Sok River** that runs through the park and alongside many of the guest houses is fun for swimming in and inner-tubing down; tubing and canoeing trips (with tube/canoe and pick-up or drop included) cost around B375/B700. Many guest houses can also arrange **elephant-rides** (2hr; B800)

The park trails

Several trails radiate from the park headquarters and visitor centre, some of them more popular and easier to follow than others, but all quite feasible as day-trips. Take plenty of water as Khao Sok is notoriously humid. The B200 national park **entrance fee** (B100 for kids) is payable at the checkpoint (6am–6pm) close to the visitor centre and is valid for 24 hours – you'll need to pay this in addition to the fees for any guided treks or tours and you'll have to pay again at the lake if you arrive more than 24 hours later. The checkpoint office and **visitor centre** (daily 8am–6pm, ⓣ077 395155) both supply a small sketch map of the park and trails, but the best introduction to Khao Sok is the recommended **guidebook**, *Waterfalls and Gibbon Calls* by Thom Henley, which includes lots of information on flora and fauna as well as a full description of the interpretative trail (see below); it's available at some Khao Sok minimarkets and bungalows. If you don't buy the book, you might want to spend a few minutes looking at the exhibition on Khao Sok's highlights inside the visitor centre.

Seven of the park's nine current **trails** branch off the same clearly signed route, which heads directly west of the park headquarters and follows the course of the Sok River. Its first 3.5km constitute the **interpretative trail** described in

Waterfalls and Gibbon Calls – a ninety-minute one-way trail along a broad, road-like track that's not terribly interesting in its own right but is greatly enhanced by the descriptions in the book. Most people carry on after the end of the interpretative trail, following signs for **Ton Gloy waterfall**, 7km from headquarters (allow 3hr each way), which flows year-round and tumbles into a pool that's good for swimming. En route to Ton Gloy, you'll pass signs for other attractions including **Bang Leap Nam waterfall** (4.5km from headquarters), which is a straightforward hike; and **Tan Sawan waterfall** (6km from headquarters), a more difficult route that includes a wade along the river bed for the final kilometre and should not be attempted during the rainy season.

The other very popular trail is the one to **Sip-et Chan waterfall**, which shoots off north from the park headquarters and follows the course of the Bang Laen River. Though these falls are only 4km from headquarters, the trail can be difficult to follow and involves a fair bit of climbing plus half a dozen river crossings. You should allow three hours each way, and take plenty of water and some food. With eleven tiers, the falls are a quite spectacular sight; on the way you should hear the hooting calls of white-handed gibbons at the tops of the tallest trees, and may get to see a helmeted hornbill flying overhead.

Cheow Lan Lake

Dubbed Thailand's Guilin because of its photogenic karst islands, forested inlets and mist-clad mountains encircling jade-coloured waters, the enormous 28-kilometre-long **CHEOW LAN LAKE** (also known as **Ratchabrapa Dam** reservoir; B200 national park entry fee) is Khao Sok's most famous feature and the most popular destination for guided tours. It was created in the 1980s when the Khlong Saeng river was dammed to power a new hydro-electricity plant, and its forested shores and hundred or more islands now harbour abundant birdlife, as well as some primates, most easily spotted in the very early morning. Tours generally combine a trip on the lake with a wade through the nearby flooded cave system and a night on a floating raft house. The lake is 65km from Khao Sok's accommodation area, and can only be explored by longtail boat tour, arranged either from Khao Sok or from Ratchabrapa Dam.

For many people, the highlight of their lake excursion is the adventurous three-hour trek to and through the 800-metre-long horseshoe-shaped **Nam Talu cave**, a five-minute boat ride from the national park raft houses, or about an hour's boat ride from the dam. The **trek** is not for everyone, however, as the cave section entails an hour-long wade through the river that hollowed out this tunnel: it's slippery underfoot and pitch black and there will be at least one 20-metre section where you have to swim. When the river level is high there will be longer swims, but on no account agree to go into the cave during the rainy season, whatever your guide says, as it's just too dangerous with high water levels and strong currents – there has been a fatality in these conditions. Wear sandals with decent grip and request (or take) your own flashlight.

Lake practicalities

Access to the lake is via the town of **Ban Ta Khun**, 50km east of Khao Sok on the Takua Pa–Surat Thani bus route, Route 401, from where it's 12km north to the dam. Many travellers book their tour of the lake from their Khao Sok accommodation, in which case all transport is included, but if coming from Surat Thani or Phang Nga, you could do the lake first before pushing on to the Khao Sok tourist village and trails. There's a regular **minibus service** from Surat Thani's Phunphin train station to and from the dam (every 2hr; 1hr; B70) or you could take the

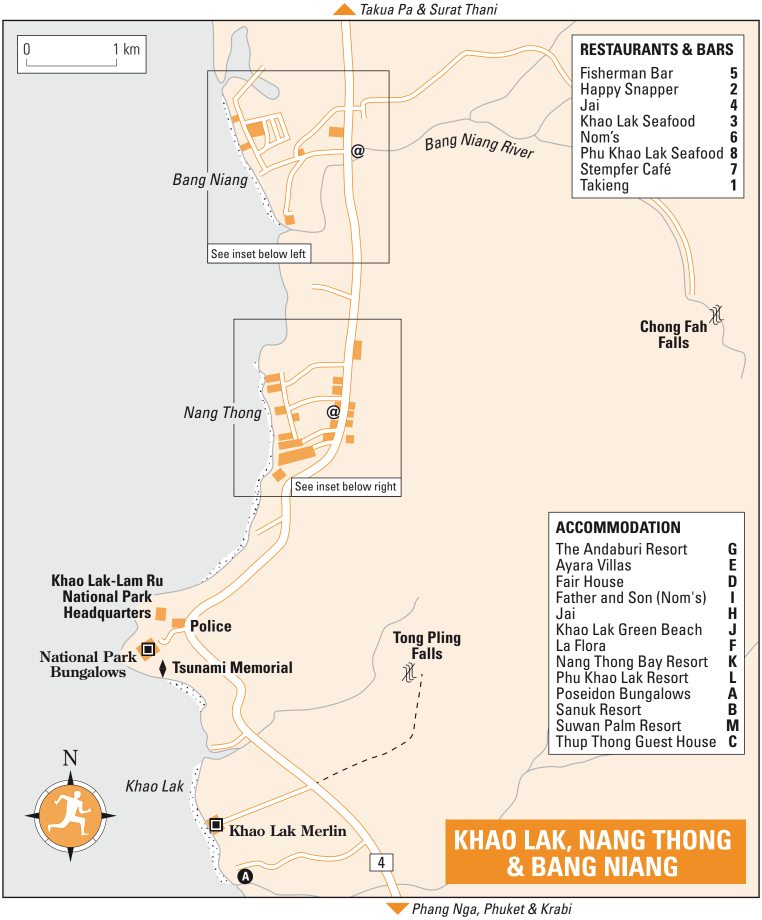
△ Cheow Lan Lake raft houses, Khao Sok

normal Surat Thani–Takua Pa bus service, as described on p.372, alight at Ban Ta Khun and either get a motorbike taxi to the dam or arrange for a tour operator to transfer you. The Australian-Thai-run Limestone Lake Rainforest Tours (Ⓣ078 954476, Ⓦwww.limestonelaketours.com) offers a big range of **lake-based tours**, including a two-hour trip (from B1500 per boat) and a full-day trip with optional overnight in a raft house (from B1500/2800 per person for up to 3 people, excluding park entry fee, or cheaper with larger groups). Khao Sok guest houses charge similar prices and all tours follow broadly the same itinerary. It's also possible to simply turn up at the dam and hire a boat for around B1800–2000.

On overnight trips to the lake, **accommodation** is either in tents in the jungle or at raft houses on the lake. There are both private and national park raft houses moored at various scenic spots around the lake shore, mostly around an hour's boat ride from the dam. All raft house huts are rudimentary bamboo structures with nets and mattresses, offering fabulous lake views from your pillow. If you've arranged your own boat transport, you can fix accommodation at any of the lake's raft houses for B500 per person including three meals. Part of the appeal of a night in a raft house is the **dawn safari** the next morning, when you've a good chance of seeing langurs, macaques and gibbons on the lakeshore; some tours include this option, or you can usually borrow a kayak from your accommodation and paddle around the shore yourself.

Khao Lak

The scenic strip of bronze-coloured beach at **KHAO LAK**, some 30km south of Takua Pa, became a household name for all the worst reasons in December 2004 when the tsunami devastated its shores, killing thousands and vaporizing almost every seafront home and hotel (see p.380 for more on how the tsunami affected


Takua Pa & Surat Thani
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RESTAURANTS & BARS
Fisherman Bar 5
Happy Snapper 2
Jai 4
Khao Lak Seafood 3
Nom's 6
Phu Khao Lak Seafood 8
Stempfer Café 7
Takieng 1
Bang Niang
See inset below left
@
Bang Niang River
Chong Fah Falls
Nang Thong
@
See inset below right
ACCOMMODATION
The Andaburi Resort G
Ayara Villas E
Fair House D
Father and Son (Nom's) I
Jai H
Khao Lak Green Beach J
La Flora F
Nang Thong Bay Resort K
Phu Khao Lak Resort L
Poseidon Bungalows A
Sanuk Resort B
Suwan Palm Resort M
Thup Thong Guest House C
Khao Lak-Lam Ru National Park Headquarters
Police
National Park Bungalows
Tsunami Memorial
Tong Pling Falls
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Khao Lak Merlin
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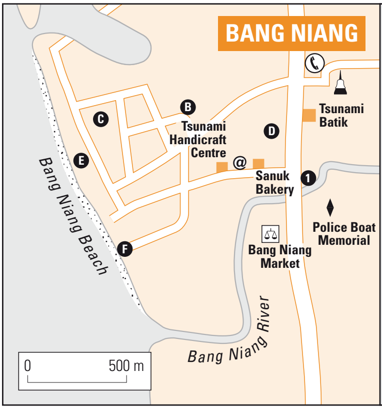
KHAO LAK, NANG THONG & BANG NIANG
Phang Nga, Phuket & Krabi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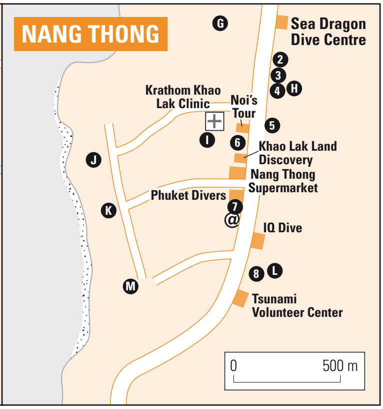
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south Thailand). It may be years before the resort regains its pre-tsunami buzz but, at the time of research, sixteen months after the disaster, a great deal of the central, Nang Thong, area had been rebuilt, and tourists were once again enjoying the beach there and using local companies for snorkelling and **diving trips** to Ko Similan (see p.385) and Ko Surin (see p.370).

The area usually referred to as Khao Lak is in fact three separate beaches. The real **Khao Lak** is the southernmost and least developed part, isolated from the heart of the resort by a rocky headland and five-kilometre run of Highway 4, and with just a few places to stay. In the area around its longest-running accommodation, *Poseidon Bungalows*, there is minimal obvious tsunami damage. **Nang Thong** occupies the central stretch and contains the bulk of the accommodation and tourist-oriented businesses. An ever-growing number of the hotels and bungalows down on Nang Thong beach, about 500m west of Highway 4, have re-established themselves, and there are still more under reconstruction, while the main road through Nang Thong is packed with small restaurants, dive operators, shops and a few guest houses. A 45-minute walk north up the beach brings you to **Bang Niang**, whose lovely long stretch of golden sand is for the most part free of rocks and good for swimming between November and April. It is also very empty – because of its flat topography, Bang Niang was the worst hit of the three areas and rebuilding has been a lot slower. By April 2006 only a few hotels and restaurants had reopened and there were still many forlorn "Land for Sale" signs on derelict plots, some with abandoned hotel buildings displaying big holes where their guts had been punched out by the waves. Inland from the highway at Bang Niang, a beached police boat has become an informal memorial to the extraordinary power of the tsunami waves – it was propelled up here, 2km inland, while patrolling the waters in front of *La Flora* resort. An official memorial is to be erected on government land near the national park headquarters just north of Khao Lak beach. Post-tsunami reconstruction is also ongoing within nearby communities that are off the tourist radar, so many NGOs still maintain offices in and around Bang Niang; among these, the Tsunami Volunteer Center, next to *Phu Khao Lak* resort in Nang Thong (Ⓣ089 882 8840, Ⓦwww.tsunamivolunteer.net), continues to welcome donations and volunteers.

Aside from Ko Similan, there are several other attractions within day-tripping distance of Khao Lak, including a number of local **waterfalls**. Of these, Sai Rung (Rainbow Falls) about 16km north of Nang Thong in Bang Sak, is considered the best. Others include Tong Pling, across from the *Merlin* resort in Khao Lak; Nam Tok Lumphi, about 20km south of Khao Lak; and Chong Fah Falls, located less than 5km east of Bang Niang, which is subject to a B200 entry fee because it's part of Khao Lak–Lam Ru National Park (Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp), whose headquarters is on the headland between Nang Thong and Khao Lak beaches.

Arrival, transport and information

Khao Lak is just 70km north of **Phuket airport** (1hr, B1500 by taxi; see p.388). All **buses** running from Phuket to Takua Pa and Ranong (and vice versa), as well as some of its Surat Thani services, pass through Khao Lak and can drop you anywhere along Highway 4; if you're coming from Krabi or Phang Nga you should take a Phuket-bound bus as far as **Khokkloi** bus terminal and switch to a Takua Pa or Ranong bus. When it comes to moving on, many guest houses and all tour operators can arrange **taxi services** for up to four people to Krabi (B450 per person), Phuket airport or beaches (B1200–1800 per taxi) and Don Sak pier for Ko Samui (B3500).

It's sometimes also feasible to use the Highway 4 buses for **local transport** between the three beaches, particularly if staying at *Poseidon* down in Khao Lak,

After the tsunami

The Boxing Day tsunami hit Thailand's Andaman coast just after 9.30am on December 26, 2004. The first place to suffer significant damage was Phuket and the next two hours saw village after resort get battered or decimated by the towering waves thundering in from the Sumatra faultline, 1000km away. The entire coastline from Ranong to Satun was affected, but not all of it with the same intensity. Topography determined which areas suffered the most damage and the figures do the talking: 4200 were recorded dead or missing in Phang Nga province, many of them in the resort of Khao Lak, where the tidal flood topped 11m and extended 3km inland; over 2000 suffered a similar fate on Ko Phi Phi, whose sandy isthmus was breached by waves that came in simultaneously from north and south; and more than 900 died on the beaches of Phuket, where Patong and Kamala suffered the biggest casualties. There were 8212 fatalities in all, a third of them holidaymakers. Another 6000 people were made homeless and some 150,000 lost their jobs, mostly in the tourism and fishing industries. By the end of that day, nearly a quarter of a million people in a dozen countries around the Indian Ocean had lost their lives in the worst natural disaster in recorded history.

Many homes, shops and hotels have since been rebuilt, and where relevant are described in this chapter. But the emotional and social legacy of the tsunami endures and most residents along the Andaman coast have a story to tell. They are stories of terror and bereavement. Of how, when the churning wave swept in, the first of several, they were whipped up by the water and pummelled like clothes in a washing machine; of how they were pinned against trees and mutilated by debris; of how they survived by clinging to flotsam for hours. Many sustained horrific injuries and local hospitals struggled to cope. Victims not at the hospital were housed in camps, where many spent weeks scouring temple mortuaries and missing-persons noticeboards, waiting for sightings of relatives and friends. It's no surprise that many tsunami survivors are now afraid of the sea. Fishermen still have to make a living but they can't forget: fearing ghosts, some longtail boatmen won't motor solo past where villages once stood. Traumatized mainlanders cannot yet step back in a boat, and hundreds of hotel staff from Phuket, Phi Phi and Khao Lak have sought new jobs in the northern city of Chiang Mai, as far from the sea as they could go.

Immediately after the tsunami, many were surprised when then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra declined offers of **aid** from foreign governments. But help poured in instead from the Thai government and from royal foundations and local and foreign NGOs and individuals. On Ko Phi Phi, volunteer divers removed, piece by piece, the fridges, beds, air-con units and suitcases that had been dumped on the sea bed. Complicated questions over land titles, squatters' rights, vested interests and environmental concerns hampered the official response to Phi Phi's reconstruction, but a roster of island workers, dive staff, concerned travellers and voluntourists took over instead, some of them remaining there for a year. In Khao Lak, a similarly diverse group of volunteers worked on projects coordinated by the Tsunami Volunteer Center (Ⓣ089 882 8840, Ⓦwww.tsunamivolunteer.net), ranging from house-building to income-generating projects for tsunami victims such as "Thaikea" furniture-making workshops; the centre continues to welcome donations and volunteers. Up in Khuraburi, away from the tourist mainstream, North Andaman Tsunami Relief (NATR; Ⓣ087 917 7165, Ⓦwww.northandamantsunamirelief.com) has also focused both on material reconstruction and on reviving the local economy, in part through an ongoing community-based tourism programme. There's more information on these charities in Basics p.75.

Generosity and altruism were not the only responses to the disaster however. Almost every tsunami-affected community talks of **dishonourable practice** and from where they charge about B10 to Nang Thong or Bang Niang. A fleet of blue songthaews also shuttles up and down Highway 4, running north from Nang Tong

corruption, experiences which have caused bitterness and rifts. Many allegations concern donated money and goods being held back by the community leaders charged with distributing them, with favouritism determining who got what. In other cases, well-intentioned privately established funds were so hamstrung by jealousies and lack of consensus that the money remained unspent or at best unused as it was intended. Many NGO projects were dedicated to building replacement houses for those made homeless by the tsunami – often in new locations, away from the devastated area, sometimes inland – but there is resentment over the number of non-victims who claimed new homes and some scammers are even said to have migrated hundreds of kilometres south from north and northeast Thailand. Some religious NGOs reportedly used blackmail: a villager could receive a new house or building materials if they denied their Buddhist or animist faith and proved, by attending church every Sunday, that they had espoused Christianity instead. Meanwhile, other genuinely homeless locals were subjected to impossible requests for documents now lost to the waves, only to find, in some cases, that big business interests subsequently muscled in on their officially “ownerless” plots.

Most small businesses had no insurance. Government **compensation** was offered but sums varied and were not, according to some, always fairly distributed. In Khao Lak, for example, an incomer might have lived and worked there for ten years but was only entitled to B17,000, or less (about US$400, or three months’ wages for someone on minimum wage), because they had not been born in the neighbourhood – a tiny fraction of the B1 million a typical Khao Lak restaurant would have cost to establish, furnish and run. The banks did their bit by offering interest-free loans for three years (and Siam Commercial Bank donated thousands of sunloungers to the big resorts, whose beachfronts have now turned purple under the welter of SCB parasols), but in a country where most family enterprises scrape by season to season, it’s sobering to contemplate the number of tsunami victims who simply picked up and started again. It’s been especially difficult for those in the **tourist industry**: in the year following the tsunami, visitor numbers dropped to less than 50 percent of recent averages and many small tourist businesses simply couldn’t continue. In places such as Ao Nang, where actual damage to property was relatively minor, the post-tsunami impact was far greater: when the local economy plummeted, beleaguered smallholders were obliged to sell their land at bargain rates, usually to bigger guns who could afford to wait for better times.

In the weeks that followed the tsunami, aftershocks were on many people’s minds and serious warnings were issued at least twice, prompting everyone to scramble up the nearest high ground. Since then, even the vaguest news of tremors in the region causes panic. The government has responded by creating a **tsunami early-warning system** that relays public announcements from special towers constructed at intervals all the way down the Andaman coast. They have also mapped out evacuation routes, highlighted by innumerable “Tsunami Hazard Zone” signs in all the big resorts. For their part, Phuket authorities have remodelled stretches of Ao Patong’s beachfront as a building-free zone, creating a park that doubles as a tsunami memorial. Krabi officials now require all new buildings to be constructed at least 30m inland from a high-tide boundary, and they even forbid the use of sunloungers below that point. In Khao Lak, an official **memorial** to the victims has been commissioned, and a museum may also be established there, though in the meantime it is the beached police boat that serves as the more palpable Khao Lak memorial: it rests where it was hurtled by the wave, two kilometres inland, on the other side of the highway.

Dive operators in Khao Lak

Khao Lak is the closest and most convenient departure point for **diving and snorkelling trips** to the Similan islands (see p.385) and beyond. These trips are extremely popular and don't necessarily leave every day, so you should try to book them in advance. Normal live-aboard boats take around four or five hours to reach the Similans from Khao Lak, but some dive operators also use speedboats for day-trippers – these take less than two hours, but aren't recommended for anyone prone to seasickness (the high-speed catamarans are less bumpy). The diving season runs from November to April, though some dive shops do run trips year-round, weather permitting. All Khao Lak dive shops also teach PADI **dive courses**, and most offer learners the option of doing the last two days of their Openwater course on location in the Similans; for advice on choosing a dive shop see Basics p.57; for more on the Similans, see p.385 and for more on Ko Surin see p.370.

IQ Dive Central Nang Thong ⓣ076 423614, ⓦwww.iq-dive.com. Swiss-Thai-run PADI Five-Star Instructor Development Centre. They use both big boats and high-speed catamarans for their one-day dive trips to the Similans (B4100 plus equipment), but also do overnight trips, using national park accommodation on the islands (around B10,000 plus equipment); accompanying snorkellers get a forty percent discount. Openwater courses from B11,000, or B13,500 with two days in the Similans.

Phuket Divers Central Nang Thong ⓣ076 420628, ⓦwww.phuketdivers.com. Four-day trips on a comfortable live-aboard boat to the Similans, Surin islands and Richelieu Rock for B17,500; two days to the Similans for B10,000. Snorkellers are welcome on both for a reduced price. A PADI Five-Star dive centre.

Poseidon At Poseidon Bungalows, 7km south of central Nang Thong, in Khao Lak (see p.379) ⓣ076 443258, ⓦwww.similantour.com. Highly recommended three-day live-aboard snorkelling trips to the Similans (B6500); can arrange dives for accompanying divers if requested (B1400/dive). Current departures are twice weekly on Tuesdays and Fridays, from the end of October to the end of April.

Sea Dragon Dive Center Northern Nang Thong ⓣ076 420420, ⓦwww.seadragondivecenter.com. The longest-running Khao Lak dive operator is managed by experienced and safety-conscious farangs, is a PADI Five-Star IDC dive centre, has a good reputation and is highly recommended. They have three live-aboard boats – including a budget traveller-oriented boat, and a deluxe boat – and prices (which all include equipment) range from B10,800 for a three-day trip to the Similans with nine dives (available year-round), to B17,800 for a four-day expedition with thirteen dives on the Similans, Surin islands, Ko Bon, Ko Tachai and Richelieu Rock. Snorkellers can accompany some trips at one-third off the price. Aside from live-aboards you can also do one-day local dives for B1300–1800. All their Padi dive courses can be done in Khao Lak, where they have their own pool – one-day Discover Scuba from B1700, or four-day Openwater for B7800 – and some can be also be done while on one of the above dive trips.

Supermarket to Takua Pa (B40), via Bang Niang (B20); the drivers also act as taxi drivers, so be careful you don't end up unintentionally chartering a whole songthaew (eg B200 to *Poseidon*). Alternatively, you can rent **motorbikes** (B200) through many hotels, and **cars** (B1200) through several tour operators, including Khao Lak Land Discovery in Nang Thong, who include insurance in all their car rentals; Budget also has an agent on the soi down to *Nang Thong Resort* (ⓦwww.budget.co.th). Noi's Tour near Nang Thong Supermarket rents **bicycles** (B100–150).

Nang Thong has **minimarkets** stocked with all the essentials, plus **banks** with ATMs and exchange counters, **Internet** access, and a **clinic** at *Krathom Khao Lak* bungalows north of Nang Thong Supermarket (every evening during high season from about 3 to 9pm; the doctor is on call 24hr; ⓣ089 868 2034). There are several tailors' shops here too. Most Nang Thong tour agents sell international and domestic air tickets and some can arrange train tickets. The biggest local **tour operator** is Khao Lak Land Discovery (ⓣ076 420411, ⓦwww.khaolakland-discovery.com). They offer lots of trips (most for a minimum of two people), including one that features elephant riding and a visit to Chong Fah Falls (B1650, kids B1200); a longtail boat tour around the karst islands of Ao Phang Nga (B1500/B1000); trekking, canoeing and elephant-riding in Khao Sok National Park (B2500/B1500); and day-trips to Ko Similan (B2500/B1800) and Ko Phi Phi (B3150/B1950). For dive operators and details of diving and snorkelling trips to Ko Similan see the box opposite. Bang Niang has fewer shops and businesses, but there is Internet access and essential supplies on the main road to the beach, and a number of outlets for **crafts** made by and in aid of tsunami victims, including the Tsunami Handicraft Centre (closed Sun) on the road to the beach, and a batik centre on the highway, where you can also learn batik-making on request. The twice-weekly **Bang Niang market** convenes every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon beside the highway and is a fun spot for a browse through stalls selling everything from hot food and fresh vegetables to clothes and household items.

Accommodation

The standard of **accommodation** in Khao Lak is high, with the vast majority of hotels benefiting from extensive post-tsunami refurbishment. The trend is upmarket, so you'll find very little under ④, but, because of slow take-up following the tsunami, you may find decent discounts are offered on the below-listed rates, even during high season. Another reason for cut-price rates, however, might be in compensation for noisy construction work nearby, so double-check with your hotel first.

Bang Niang

Ayara Villas ⓣ076 423108, ⓦwww.ayara-villas.com. An attractive upper-range option, where the 57 air-con rooms, most of them in terraced bungalows just a few metres from the sea, are smartly furnished in dark wood and all have kitchenettes. ⑦–⑧

Fair House ⓣ089 473 7985. Currently the cheapest place to stay in Bang Niang, with its handful of neat, fan-cooled concrete bungalows and rooms widely spaced around a garden set back from the highway, about a kilometre's walk from the beach. Contact the *Fair House* office right beside Highway 4 to check in. ④

La Flora ⓣ076 428000, ⓦwww.lafloraresort.com. The 77 rooms at this upscale beachfront hotel are all furnished in elegant contemporary Asian style, with day beds, stylish bathrooms and balconies. The cheaper ones are in three-storey hotel wings, and you pay extra for stand-alone villas, many of which enjoy direct sea views. There's a pool and spa, Internet access, and mountain bike and kayak rental. ⑨

Sanuk Resort ⓣ076 420800, ⓦwww.sanukresort.com. This little complex of five brick bungalows occupies a small grassy garden compound, with tiny pool, just 100m from the beach. Rooms come with either fan or air-con and all have fridges and coffee-making facilities. Check in via the office next to the Sanuk Bakery on the main access road from the highway. ⑤–⑥

Thup Thong Guest House ⓣ076 420722, ⓔthupthong@gmail.com. The dozen large fan rooms here occupy a small three-storey block just back from the beach and all have a balcony offering either a sea view or an inland one. ⑤–⑥

Nang Thong

The Andaburi Resort ⓣ076 443388, ⓦwww.theandaburiresort.com. A good value upper-mid-range resort comprising sleek, modern air-con rooms in bungalows and two-storey terraced blocks set around a garden with a decent-sized swimming pool. There's no direct beach access, but it's about a 500-metre walk to the sea. ⑦–⑧

Father and Son (Nom's) ⓣ076 420277. This tiny haven of a place occupies a lovely, unexpectedly spacious tropical garden, a good distance behind Nom's restaurant and away from the highway. It offers just ten bungalows, the cheapest of which are made of bamboo and are the least expensive rooms in Khao Lak; sturdier concrete options are also available. All bungalows are en suite and have fans. The on-site Father and Son massage service has a great reputation. Phone ahead as it's very popular. ②–⑤

Jai ⓣ076 420390. A busy, family-run place that fills up fast not least because it offers some of the cheapest accommodation in Khao Lak. The 15 good-quality en-suite concrete bungalows are fan cooled and are dotted around a small garden behind the excellent restaurant, quite close to the highway and about 600m from the beach. ③–④

Khao Lak Green Beach ⓣ081 952 0917, ⓔgreenbeach_th@yahoo.com. The attractive design and shorefront location of the bungalows here make this a good-value option. The cream-painted chalet-style bungalows come with fan or air-con chalets and all have polished wood floors, pretty furnishings, garden showers and a fridge. Some are right on the shore. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑥–⑦

Nang Thong Bay Resort ⓣ076 420088, ⓔnangthong1@hotmail.com. Efficiently run, popular, good-quality beachfront place that offers a range of smartly maintained air-con bungalows and hotel-style rooms in small blocks. Interiors have contemporary furnishings and some have garden bathrooms. The bungalows are well spaced around the shorefront garden, so many have sea views, and there's a sea-view swimming pool as well. Prices drop by 50 percent Oct–May. ⑦–⑧

Phu Khao Lak Resort ⓣ076 420141, ⓔphukhaolak@hotmail.com. There is a luxurious amount of space at this well-run place, where the two-dozen large, spotlessly clean brick and concrete bungalows sit prettily amid a grassy lawned park-style coconut plantation. Rooms have fans and bathrooms and are among the cheapest in the resort, about 500m walk from the beach. Price depends on the size of the bungalow. ④

Suwan Palm Resort ⓣ076 423170, ⓦwww.suwanpalm.com. Occupying a prime beachfront location, with sea views enjoyed by most of its 44 rooms, this place offers comfortably furnished upper-bracket air-con rooms in a three-storey block, plus a pool, on-site pub, spa and shop. ⑧–⑨

Khao Lak

Poseidon Bungalows ⓣ076 443258, ⓦwww.similantour.com. Seven kilometres south of central Nang Thong, above a wild and rocky shore surrounded by rubber plantations, this Swedish-Thai-run guest house is a lovely place to hang out for a few days and it's also a long-established organizer of snorkelling expeditions to the Similan islands (see p.382). All 15 bungalows are en suite and fan-cooled, and some can sleep four; there's a restaurant too, plus Internet access and motorbike rental. To get here, either ask to be dropped off the bus at the *Poseidon* access road between kilometre-stones 53 and 54, from where it's a walk of 1km; or get off at the bus station in nearby Lam Kaen village (between kilometre-stones 50 and 51), from where it's easy to get a B40 motorbike taxi ride to the bungalows. Motorbikes are available for rent. ⑤–⑥

Eating and drinking

Except where stated, all listed restaurants and bars are located alongside the highway in Nang Thong.

Fisherman Bar A lively bar that's popular with young NGO workers, serves cocktails very cheap 5–8pm, holds regular barbecues and sometimes has live music. Nightly 5pm–1am.

Happy Snapper This very chilled-out bar and restaurant is popular with dive instructors and makes a pleasant place to while away an evening. Upstairs, it's mainly floor seating in the open-sided sala among the Thai and Burmese artefacts, while downstairs there's live music most nights from 10.30pm except Sundays (usually blues), and the occasional open-mike session for would-be entertainers. The food menu is fairly limited but tasty enough, featuring mid-priced tacos, pasta and red snapper; the drinks menu runs to 140 different cocktails. Nightly 6pm–1am.

Jai Deservedly popular restaurant that serves lots of different curries (from B60), including penang and *matsaman* versions, as well as plenty of seafood, *tom yam* and the like.

Khao Lak Seafood Very popular, unpretentious place to sample the local catch; most dishes B60–200.

Nom's Nang Thong. Home-style cooking: mainly noodle and rice dishes (from B40) as well as plenty of fresh seafood.

Phu Khao Lak Seafood Well-known and good-value restaurant attached to the bungalows of the same name serving exceptionally good Thai food from a menu that stretches to over 100 dishes. Everything from red, yellow and green curries (from B60) to seafood platters (B200).

Stempfer Café European-run café serving eight different set breakfasts (B50–100), fresh coffees, hot chocolate, lots of cakes and bread, plus salads and a few hot dishes.

Takieng Next to the police-boat tsunami memorial in Bang Niang. Authentic Thai food, including good tom yum kung and seafood, at authentic Thai prices (B40–100).

Ko Similan

Rated by *Skin Diver* magazine as one of the world's top ten spots for both above-water and underwater beauty, the eleven islands at the heart of the **KO SIMILAN** National Park (Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp) are among the most exciting **diving** destinations in Thailand. Massive granite boulders set magnificently against turquoise waters give the islands their distinctive character, but it's the thirty-metre visibility that draws the divers. The underwater scenery is nothing short of overwhelming here: the reefs teem with a host of coral fish, from the long-nosed butterfly fish to the black-, yellow-and-white-striped angel fish, and the ubiquitous purple and turquoise parrot fish, which nibble so incessantly at the coral. A little further offshore, magnificent mauve and burgundy crown-of-thorns starfish stalk the sea bed, gobbling chunks of coral as they go – and out here you'll also see turtles, manta rays, moray eels, jacks, reef sharks, sea snakes, red grouper and quite possibly white-tip sharks, barracuda, giant lobster and enormous tuna.

The **islands** lie 64km off the mainland and include the eponymous Ko Similan chain of nine islands as well as two more northerly islands, Ko Bon and Ko Tachai, which are both favoured haunts of manta rays and whale sharks and are half way between the Similan chain and the islands of Ko Surin. The nine islands of the Similan chain are numbered north–south from nine to one and often referred to by number. In descending order, they are: Ko Ba Ngu (number nine), Ko Similan, Ko Hin Posar (aka Hin Huwagralok), Ko Payoo, Ko Ha, Ko Miang (number four), Ko Pahyan, Ko Pahyang and Ko Hu Yong. Only Ko Ba Ngu and Ko Miang are inhabited, with the national park headquarters and accommodation located on the latter; some tour groups are also allowed to camp on Ko Similan. Ko Similan is the largest island in the chain, blessed with a beautiful, fine white-sand bay and impressive boulders; Ko Miang has two pretty beaches, twenty minutes' walk apart; Ko Hu Yong has an exceptionally long white-sand bay and is used by **turtles** for egg-laying (see box on p.505) from November to February.

Such beauty has not gone unnoticed and the islands are extremely popular with day-trippers from Phuket and Khao Lak, as well as with divers and snorkellers on longer live-aboard trips. This has caused the inevitable congestion and environmental problems and the Similan reefs have been damaged in places by anchors and by the local practice of using dynamite in fishing. National parks authorities have responded by taking drastic action to protect this precious region, banning fishermen from the island chain (to vociferous and at times violent protest), imposing a three-kilometre ban on sport fishing and enforcing strict regulations for tourist boats. Although Ko Similan is open all year, during the **monsoon season** between mid-May and mid-November only dive boats visit the islands as high seas make it too dangerous for day-trippers' fast boats.

Practicalities

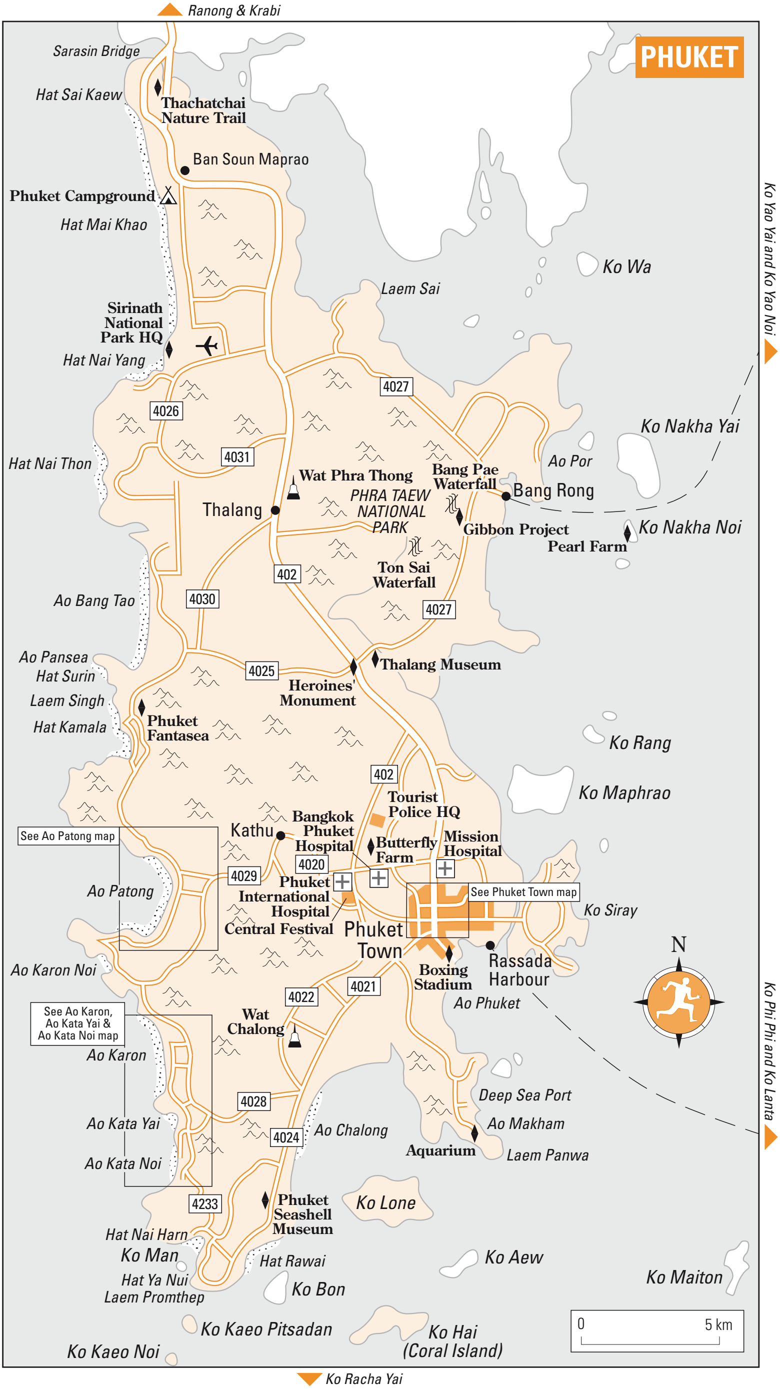
Most travel agents in Khao Lak, Phuket and Phang Nga sell one-day (B2500–3000) and overnight (from B4500) snorkelling **packages** to Ko Similan (usually mid-Nov–mid-May only), which feature at least four island stops. The majority of these trips carry quite large groups and use fast boats that depart from **Thap Lamu pier**, about 8km south of central Khao Lak, 90 km north of Phuket town, at 8.30am and get to their first island stop, Ko Ba Ngu, in under two hours. They depart the islands at around 3pm. Independent travellers wanting to stay on the island for a few days can usually use these **boats** for transfers, with the chance of a discount if joining the boat at Thap Lamu pier rather than being picked up from one of the resorts. Companies offering this service include Jack Similan (Ⓣ076 443205, Ⓦwww.jacksimilan.com) and Met Sine Travel and Tours (Ⓣ076 443276, Ⓦwww.similanthailand.com), both of which have offices at the Thap Lamu pier. If travelling independently, you'll need to use Ko Similan longtail boats to travel **between the islands** and to explore different reefs: prices are fixed and cost B150–300 per person, depending on the distance.

Limited **accommodation** is available on Ko Miang, in the shape of national park bungalows sleeping 4–8 people (B600–2000) and tents (B200–400), and there's an expensive restaurant. You should book your accommodation in advance, either with the national parks office near Thap Lamu pier (Ⓣ076 595045) or online (Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp), as facilities can get crowded with tour groups, especially at weekends and holidays. There's no drinking water available outside Ko Miang, and campfires are prohibited on all the islands.

Overcrowding is a growing problem at the Similans and the best way to escape this is to join a small-scale **live-aboard** diving or snorkelling trip to the islands, which means you can visit the best spots before or after the package-tour groups. The best and cheapest of these run out of Khao Lak, the closest mainland resort to the Similans; Phuket is another popular springboard and you can also start live-aboard trips from Ko Chang (see p.362) and Ko Phayam (see p.366). Khao Lak prices start at B10,000 for a two-day live-aboard **diving** trip, with about a forty percent discount for accompanying snorkellers, while a three-day dedicated **snorkelling** live-aboard costs B6500; for full details see p.382. Most of the Phuket-based dive operators (see p.408) only offer three- or four-day live-aboards to the Similans (also featuring Richelieu Rock and a couple of other sites) for B20,000–30,000 (excluding equipment); some trips are open to accompanying snorkellers at a slight discount. IQ Dive in Khao Lak (see box on p.382) also does one-day dive and snorkel trips to the Similans (B4100/2300 excluding equipment), and Santana on Phuket does one-day dives (B4600; see p.409).

Phuket

Thailand's largest island and a province in its own right, **Phuket** (pronounced "Poo-ket") has been a prosperous region since the nineteenth century, when Chinese merchants got in on its tin-mining and sea-borne trade, before turning to the rubber industry. It remains the wealthiest province in Thailand, with the highest per-capita income, but what mints the money nowadays is **tourism**: with an annual influx of foreign visitors that tops one million, Phuket ranks second in popularity only to Pattaya, and the package-tour traffic has wrought its usual transformations. Thoughtless tourist developments have scarred much of the island, and the trend on all the beaches is upmarket, with very few budget possibilities, though some of Phuket's tiny offshore islands offer a calmer and often better-value alternative. Remoter parts of Phuket itself are also still attractive, however, particularly the interior, whose fertile, hilly expanse is dominated by rubber and pineapple plantations. Many inland neighbourhoods are clustered round the local mosque – 35 percent of Phuketians are **Muslim**, and there are said to be more mosques on the island than Buddhist temples – and, though the atmosphere is generally as easy-going as elsewhere in Thailand, it's especially important to dress with some modesty outside the main resorts, and to not sunbathe topless on any of the beaches. Phuket's watersports and diving facilities are among the best in the country, but as with the rest of


PHUKET
Ranong & Krabi
Sarasin Bridge
Hat Sai Kaew
Thachatchai Nature Trail
Ban Soun Maprao
Phuket Campground
Hat Mai Khao
Sirinath National Park HQ
Hat Nai Yang
4026
4031
Hat Nai Thon
Laem Sai
Ko Wa
4027
Ko Yao Yai and Ko Yao Noi
Ko Nakha Yai
Ao Por
Bang Pae Waterfall
Bang Rong
Wat Phra Thong
PHRA TAEW NATIONAL PARK
Thalang
Gibbon Project
Pearl Farm
Ko Nakha Noi
402
4030
Ton Sai Waterfall
4027
Ao Bang Tao
Ao Pansea
Hat Surin
Laem Singh
Hat Kamala
4025
Thalang Museum
Heroines' Monument
Phuket Fantasea
Ko Rang
402
Ko Maphrao
Tourist Police HQ
See Ao Patong map
Kathu
Bangkok Phuket Hospital
Butterfly Farm
Mission Hospital
4020
4029
Ao Patong
Phuket International Hospital
See Phuket Town map
Ko Siray
Central Festival
Phuket Town
N
Ao Karon Noi
Boxing Stadium
Rassada Harbour
4022
4021
Ao Phuket
See Ao Karon, Ao Kata Yai & Ao Kata Noi map
Wat Chalong
Ao Karon
4028
Deep Sea Port
Ao Kata Yai
4024
Ao Chalong
Ao Makham
Aquarium
Laem Panwa
Ko Phi Phi and Ko Lanta
Ao Kata Noi
4233
Phuket Seashell Museum
Ko Lone
Hat Nai Harn
Ko Man
Hat Rawai
Ko Aew
Ko Maiton
Hat Ya Nui
Laem Promthep
Ko Bon
Ko Kaeo Pitsadan
Ko Hai (Coral Island)
0
5 km
Ko Kaeo Noi
Ko Racha Yai

the Andaman coast, the sea is at its least inviting during the **monsoon**, from June to October, when Phuket's west-coast beaches in particular become quite rough and windswept. Some stretches of Phuket's coast were very badly damaged by the December 2004 tsunami, which caused significant loss of life and destroyed a lot of property. Reconstruction was swift, however, and a first-time visitor to the island is now unlikely to notice any major post-tsunami effect. For more on the tsunami and its legacy, see the box on pp.380–81.

Phuket's capital, Muang Phuket or **Phuket town**, is on the southeast coast, 42km south of the Sarasin Bridge linking the island to the mainland. Most people pass straight through the town on their way to the **west coast**, where three resorts corner the bulk of the trade: high-rise **Ao Patong**, the most developed and expensive, with an increasingly seedy nightlife; the slightly nicer, if unexceptional, **Ao Karon**; and adjacent **Ao Kata**, the smallest of the trio. If you're after a more peaceful spot, aim for the seventeen-kilometre-long national park beach of **Hat Mai Khao**, its more developed neighbour **Hat Nai Yang**, or one of the smaller alternatives at **Hat Nai Thon**, or **Hat Kamala**. Most of the other west-coast beaches are dominated by just a few upmarket hotels, specifically **Hat Nai Harn**, **Ao Pansea** and **Ao Bang Tao**, while the south and east coasts have unswimmable beaches and are used mainly for access to other islands, including **Ko Racha Yai** or **Ko Kaeo Pisadan**.

There's a wide-ranging **website** about Phuket, Ⓦwww.phuket.com, which is particularly good for discounted accommodation on the island.

Getting to the island

There's no shortage of transport to Phuket, with plenty of flights from Bangkok, a good bus service from major southern towns, and ferries running in from nearby islands.

By air

Quite a few airlines operate direct **international flights** to Phuket, so if you're starting your Thailand trip in the south, it may be worth flying straight here or via another Asian city rather than having to make connections via Bangkok. Between them, Thai Airways, Bangkok Airways, Air Asia and Nok Air run fifteen **domestic flights** a day between Bangkok and Phuket (1hr 20min), while Bangkok Airways also runs daily flights to Phuket from Pattaya (1hr 40min) and Ko Samui (50min).

Phuket International Airport (Ⓣ076 327230) is located on the northwest coast of the island, 32km northwest of Phuket town. There is an hourly **airport bus** that runs as far as the bus station in Phuket town but does not serve the beaches (you'll need to change onto the songthaews in town to reach those); buses run from the airport 6.30am–5.30pm and cost B52 to the bus terminal, taking about an hour. In the reverse direction they depart approximately hourly 5am–6.30pm. There's also an **airport minibus**, which will drop you at your hotel and charges B100 per person for the ride into town, B150 to Ao Patong and B180 to Ao Kata or Ao Karon. **Taxis** cost about B400–600 to the main west-coast beaches of Ao Patong, Ao Karon and Ao Kata, or about B300 to Phuket town. **Rental car** companies Avis (Ⓣ076 351244, Ⓦwww.avisthailand.com) and Budget (Ⓣ076 205397, Ⓦwww.budget.co.th) both have desks in the arrivals area, and there's a **left-luggage** service (daily 6am–10pm; B40/item/day).

The cheapest way for solo travellers to **get to the airport** is by the airport bus, described above, but from the resorts, most people use taxis instead, a service offered by nearly all hotels on Patong, Karon and Kata for B400–600; the trip takes about an hour. One company on Patong offers a cheaper hourly minibus service, described on p.403. The domestic **departure tax** is included in the price of the air ticket, but for international departures you will be charged at check-in: until January 2007 the tax is B500, but from February 1, 2007 it rises to B700. Contact details for the Phuket offices of international and domestic airlines are given on p.396.

By bus

Direct **air-con buses** from Bangkok to Phuket leave from the Southern Bus Terminal and take about 14 hours to reach Phuket town's bus station; most make the journey overnight, departing from mid-afternoon onwards. Most return buses also travel overnight. There is no train service to Phuket, but you could book an overnight sleeper train to Surat Thani, about 290km east of Phuket, and take a bus from there to Phuket (about six hours). There are plenty of ordinary and air-con buses between **Surat Thani** and Phuket, some of which run via **Khao Sok**, **Takua Pa** and **Khao Lak**, and a fast private minibus service also runs from Phuket's *Montri Hotel* on Thanon Montri to Surat Thani (every 2hr; 4hr 30min; B220). Takua Pa is a useful interchange for local services to Khuraburi and Ranong, though there are a few direct buses between **Ranong** and Phuket. As for points further south: numerous buses travel between **Krabi** and Phuket, via **Phang Nga**, and there are also frequent services to and from **Trang**, **Hat Yai** and **Nakhon Si Thammarat**; a private minibus service also runs between Phuket town and Nakhon Si Thammarat, departing from the Thanon Deebuk/Thanon Suthat junction (hourly; 7hr; B220). The TAT office in Phuket town (see p.396) keeps up-to-date bus timetables.

Nearly all buses to and from Phuket use the **bus station** (☎076 211977) at the eastern end of Thanon Phang Nga in Phuket town, from where it's a ten-minute walk or a short tuk-tuk ride to the town's central hotel area, and slightly further to the Thanon Ranong departure-point for songthaews to the beaches. The hourly airport bus also serves the bus terminal.

By boat

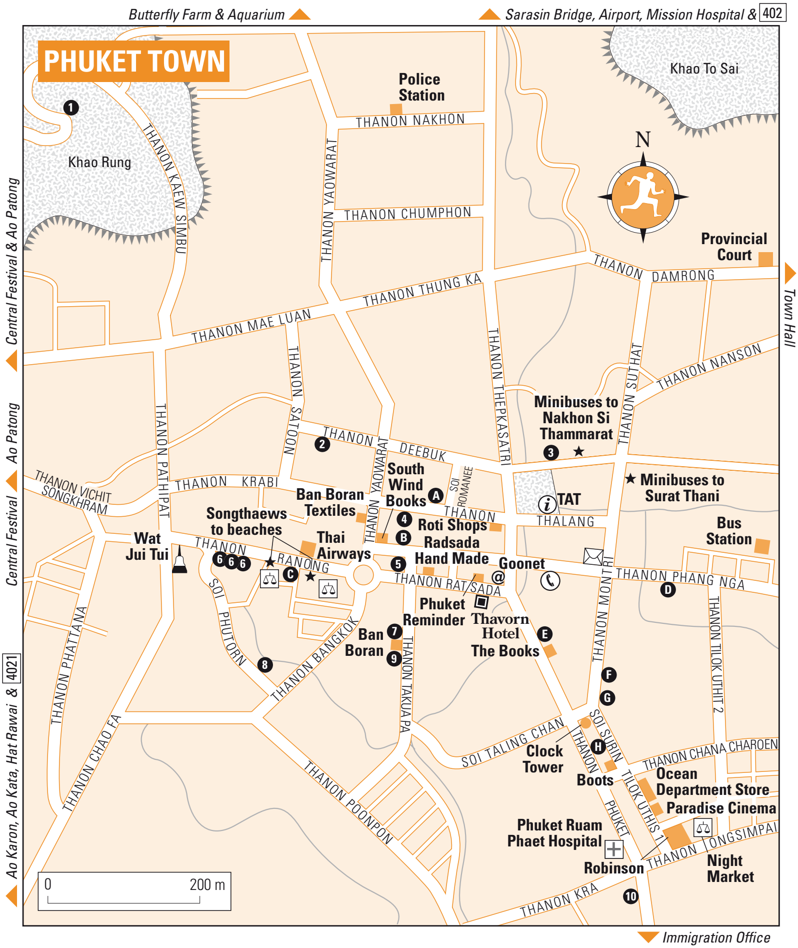
If you're coming to Phuket from Ko Phi Phi, Ko Lanta or Ao Nang, the quickest and most scenic option is to take the **boat**. During peak season, up to three ferries a day make the trip to and from **Ko Phi Phi** (1hr 30min–2hr 30min), usually docking at Rassada Harbour on Phuket's east coast; during low season, there's at least one ferry a day in both directions. Travellers from **Ko Lanta** (service available Nov–May only; 1 daily; 4hr 30min) may have to change boats at **Ao Nang** (Nov–May only; 1 daily; 2hr 30min) or Ko Phi Phi. Minibuses meet the ferries in Phuket and charge B70 per person for transfers to Phuket town hotels, B150 to the major west-coast beaches, or B200 to the airport (leave plenty of extra time if you have a flight to catch as boats are notoriously tardy); some ferry agents include the transfer price in their tickets. Taxis to the main beaches usually cost B500.

Island transport

Although the best west-coast beaches are connected by road, to get from one beach to another by **public transport** you nearly always have to go back into Phuket town; songthaews run regularly throughout the day from Thanon Ranong in the town centre and cost between B20 and B40 from town to the coast. **Tuk-tuks and taxis** do travel directly between major beaches, but charge around B100 from Kata to Karon, B200 between Patong and Karon, and B300 for Karon to Kamala. For transport within resorts, the cheapest option is to make use of the public songthaews where possible, and to hail **motorbike taxis** elsewhere (from B20). However, many tourists on Phuket ride **motorbikes** or mopeds, available for rent on all the main beaches for B200–250 per day (be sure to ask for a helmet, as the compulsory helmet law is strictly enforced in most areas of Phuket, with fines of B500 for not wearing them); alternatively, rent a **jeep** for B800–1200. Be aware though that traffic accidents are legion on Phuket, especially for bikers: some reports put the number of motorbike fatalities on Phuket as high as three hundred per year, many of which could allegedly have been prevented if the rider had been wearing a helmet.

Phuket town

Though it has plenty of hotels and restaurants, **PHUKET TOWN** (Muang Phuket) stands distinct from the tailor-made tourist settlements along the beaches as a place geared primarily towards its residents. Most visitors hang about just long


Butterfly Farm & Aquarium
Sarasin Bridge, Airport, Mission Hospital & 402
PHUKET TOWN
Khao Rung
Khao To Sai
Police Station
N
Provincial Court
Town Hall
Central Festival & Ao Patong
Ao Patong
Central Festival
Ao Karon, Ao Kata, Hat Rawai & 4021
Immigration Office
THANON NAKHON
THANON CHUMPHON
THANON YAOWARAT
THANON KAEW SIMBU
THANON MAE LUAN
THANON THUNG KA
THANON DAMRONG
THANON NANSON
THANON SUTHAT
THANON THEPKASATRI
THANON SATOON
THANON DEEBUK
THANON PATHIPAT
THANON KRABI
THANON VICHIT SONGKHRAM
SOI ROMANEE
THANON THALANG
THANON RANONG
THANON RAT SADA
THANON PHANG NGA
THANON MONTRI
THANON TILOK UTHIT 2
SOI PHUTORN
THANON BANGKOK
THANON TAKUA PA
SOI TALING CHAN
SOI SURIN
THANON PHUKET
THANON TILOK UTHIS 1
THANON CHANA CHAROEN
THANON ONGSIMPAI
THANON KRA
THANON POONPON
THANON PHATTANA
THANON CHAO FA
Minibuses to Nakhon Si Thammarat
Minibuses to Surat Thani
Bus Station
TAT
South Wind Books
Ban Boran Textiles
Songthaews to beaches
Thai Airways
Wat Jui Tui
Roti Shops
Radsada Hand Made
Goonet
Phuket Reminder
Thavorn Hotel
The Books
Ban Boran
Clock Tower
Boots
Ocean Department Store
Paradise Cinema
Phuket Ruam Phaet Hospital
Robinson
Night Market
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ACCOMMODATION			
Crystal Guest House	F	On On Hotel	B
Crystal Inn	H	Phuket Backpacker Hostel	C
Imperial Hotel	E	Royal Phuket City	D
The Metropole Phuket	G	Talang Guest House	A

RESTAURANTS			
China Inn Café	4	Lemongrass	3
Dibuk Restaurant	2	Natural Restaurant (Thammachat)	8
Ka Jok See	9	Phuket View Restaurant	1
Kanasutra	7	Salvatore's Restaurant	5
La Gaetana	10	Vegetarian Restaurants	6

enough to jump on a beach-bound songthaew, but you may find yourself returning for a welcome dose of real life; Phuket town has an enjoyably authentic market on Thanon Ranong, great restaurants and some of the best handicraft shops on the island. If you're on a tight budget, the town is worth considering as a base, as accommodation and food come a little less expensive, and you can get out to all the beaches with relative ease. Bear in mind, though, that the town offers limited nightlife, and as public transport to and from the more lively beaches stops at dusk, you'll have to either rent your own wheels or spend a lot of money on tuk-tuks.

The town's most interesting sights are its historic colonial-style **Sino-Portuguese shophouses**, which were built by Chinese merchants who emigrated from Penang in the late nineteenth century. A string of these elegant old buildings lines the still charmingly traditional western arm of **Thanon Thalang**, where signs at a dozen shops highlight the special features worth an upward glance, including pastel-coloured doors and shutters, elaborate stucco mouldings and ornate wooden doors. The Thanon Yaowarat end of the road is dominated by Chinese shops and businesses including *Talang Guest House* at no. 37 (see p.392), and the delightful *China Inn Café* at no. 20 (see p.393); 100m further east along Thanon Thalang there's more of an Islamic emphasis, with many old-style shops selling fabric and dressmaking accessories, including lots of good-value sarongs from Malaysia and Indonesia, and several Muslim roti shops. Restoration work at buildings along **Thanon Romanee**, the tiny soi north off Thalang that was once a red-light alley, means that this road is also worth a stroll, as is the western arm of nearby **Thanon Deebuk** (Dibuk), around *Dibuk Restaurant* at no. 69, where doors and window shutters display intricate wooden fretwork. You'll find other renovated Sino-Portuguese buildings on Thanon Yaowarat, and on Thanon Ranong (where the Thai Airways office is a fine example), Thanon Phang Nga (the *On On Hotel*) and Thanon Damrong, where the town hall, just east of the Provincial Court, stood in for the US embassy in Phnom Penh in the film *The Killing Fields*. There's a much quainter, mustier whiff of the past contained within the wood-panelled lobby of Thanon Rat Sada's *Thavorn Hotel*, whose museum-like reception area and adjacent rooms, signed as the **Phuket History Corner**, are filled with faded photos of historic Phuket, plus a jumble of posters, typewriters and other everyday objects dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most of it amassed by the Thavorn family. Entry is free and non-guests are welcome to admire the eclectic collection, some of which also spills over into the hotel's streetside *Collector Pub*.

Kids usually enjoy the **Phuket Butterfly Farm and Aquarium** (*Faam Phi Seua*; daily 9am–5pm; B200, kids B100), located a couple of kilometres beyond the northern end of Thanon Yaowarat at 71/6 Soi Paneang in Ban Sam Kong, but though there are heaps of butterflies of various species, and a few reef fish, there's a lack of specific information. There's no public **transport** to the butterfly farm, but a tuk-tuk from the town centre should cost around B100 return. If you have your own vehicle, follow Thanon Yaowarat as far north as you can and then pick up the signs for the farm.

Accommodation

Few tourists choose to stay in Phuket town, but there's a reasonable spread of accommodation to choose from and it's a much better place to meet other travellers than at the beaches.

Crystal Guest House 41/16 Thanon Montri ☎076 222774. Old fashioned, hotel-style downtown guest house where all rooms are en suite, though some of the cheapest have no window; the most expensive have air-con, hot water and TV. Fan ②, air-con ③

Crystal Inn 2/1-10 Soi Surin, Thanon Montri ☎076 256789. Surprisingly stylish and contemporary bedroom decor make this small 54-room downtown hotel an inviting and good-value option. All rooms have air-con. ⑤

Day-trips and other activities

There are heaps of things to do on Phuket, and tour agents on all the main beaches will be only too happy to fix you up with your activity of choice, or you can arrange it yourself by calling the relevant numbers. Transport from your hotel is usually included in the price of a day-trip. For details of dive operators in Phuket, see p.408.

Activities and days out

Bicycle touring Full- and half-day guided mountain-bike rides into Phuket's peaceful, scenic interior with Action Holidays Phuket (ⓣ076 263575, ⓦwww.biketoursthailand.com; full day from B1950/kids B1600).

Deep-sea fishing Day-trips and overnight charters in custom-built boats from Andaman Hooker ⓣ076 282036, ⓦwww.phuket.com/fishing/andaman.htm; Harry's Fishing Adventures ⓣ076 340418, ⓦwww.harrysfishing-phuket.com; and Phuket Sportfishing Centre ⓣ076 214713.

Elephant trekking Many companies offer the chance to ride an elephant, including the award-winning, conservation-conscious Siam Safari, whose tour also includes a visit to their elephant camp in the hills behind Chalong (ⓣ076 280116, ⓦwww.siamsafari.com; from B1350, kids B700).

Golf Phuket has four eighteen-hole courses open to the public, costing B3100 to B5300, with club rental B400–850 and caddies about B200: the Blue Canyon Country Club near Hat Nai Yang ⓣ076 328088, ⓦwww.bluecanyonclub.com; the Laguna Phuket Club on Hat Bang Tao ⓣ076 270991, ⓦwww.lagunaphuket.com/golfclub; the Loch Palm Golf Club in Kathu ⓣ076 321929, ⓦwww.lochpalm.com; and the Phuket Country Club, also in Kathu ⓣ076 321038, ⓦwww.phuketcountryclub.com. You can arrange golf packages through Phuket Golf Tours ⓣ076 244893, ⓦwww.phuketgolftours.com.

Horse-riding Ride along jungle trails and sandy beaches with Phuket Laguna Riding Club on Hat Bang Tao ⓣ076 324199 ⓦwww.phuket-bangtao-horseriding.com, or Phuket Riding Club in Rawai ⓣ076 288213.

Sea-canoeing Sunset, one- and two-day expeditions in sea-canoes around the spectacular limestone karsts of Ao Phang Nga (see p.424), or in Khao Sok National

Imperial Hotel 51 Thanon Phuket, ⓣ076 212311. This small, all-air-con hotel is a handily central standby if preferred options are full. Rooms are old style and shabby but comfortable and all have TV. ⑤

The Metropole Phuket 1 Thanon Montri ⓣ076 215050, ⓦwww.metropolephuket.com. Grand, conservative high-rise hotel that's popular with domestic tourists and businesspeople. The air-con rooms are comfortably outfitted if not especially elegant; some are wheelchair accessible. There's also a fourth-floor outdoor pool and traditional massage service. ⑧

On On Hotel 19 Thanon Phang Nga ⓣ076 211154. This attractive, colonial-style 1920s building is a long-running travellers' favourite, mainly because the rooms are so cheap. They're pretty basic, with very thin walls, holes in the floorboards and ancient plumbing, but they're adequate; the cheapest share bathrooms, the most expensive have air-con. There's Internet access and a tour agent in the lobby. Shared bathroom ①, en suite ②, air-con ③

Phuket Backpacker Hostel 167 Thanon Ranong, ⓣ 076 256680, ⓦwww.phuketbackpacker.com. Right in the fresh market a couple of steps from the songthaew stop for the beaches, this place has made a big effort to look modern and upbeat, with bright colour schemes, abstract art on the walls, a DVD lounge and a communal kitchen. It offers B250 dorm bunk beds in four-bed train-like cubicles within a mixed-sex 16-bed fan dorm, or B350 beds in smaller air-con dorms. It also has some cheerful fan and air-con singles and doubles, though most of these just have windows onto a passageway. ④

Royal Phuket City 154 Thanon Phang Nga ⓣ076 233333, ⓦwww.royalphuketcity.com. Large, high-rise business hotel, with swimming pool, spa, gym, business centre and comfortable air-con rooms, most of them with fine views over the city. ⑦

Talang Guest House 37 Thanon Thalang ⓣ076 214225, ⓦwww.thalangguesthouse.com. Housed in a 1940s', Sino-Portuguese, wood-

Park (see p.372) for around B3000–3500 per person per day. Contact John Gray's Sea Canoe ⓣ076 254505, ⓦwww.johngray-seacanoe.com.

Thai cookery courses Different daily classes at Phuket Thai Cookery School east of Phuket town (ⓣ076 252354, ⓦwww.phuket-thaicookeryschool.com; B1900 incl. transfer from main beaches); and at many hotels, including, most famously, every Saturday and Sunday at *Mom Tri's Boathouse* hotel on Ao Kata Yai (ⓣ076 330015, ⓦwww.boathousephuket.com; B2000 for one day, or B3200 for both days).

Nights out

Phuket Fantasea ⓣ076 385000, ⓦwww.phuket-fantasea.com. Enjoyable spectacular that's staged at the Fantasea entertainments complex just inland of Hat Kamala. The 75-minute show is a slick, hi-tech fusion of high-wire trapeze acts, acrobatics, pyrotechnics, illusionists, comedy and traditional dance – plus a depressing baby elephant circus. Transport should be included in the steep ticket price (B1100/800 adults/children), with an optional, unexciting pre-show dinner (B500). The show starts at 9pm every night except Thursday; tickets can be bought through any tour operator.

Phuket Simon Cabaret ⓣ076 342011, ⓦwww.phuket-simoncabaret.com. Famous extravaganza in which a troupe of outrageously flamboyant transvestites perform song-and-dance numbers. It's all very Hollywood – a little bit risqué but not at all sleazy – so the show is popular with tour groups and families. The cabarets are staged two or three times a night, and tickets can be bought from any tour agent for B500–600 (kids B300/400); agents should provide free transport to the theatre, which is south of Patong, on the road to Karon.

Thai Boxing Bouts at the Saphan Hin stadium, located at the southern end of Thanon Phuket in Saphan Hin, just south of Phuket town (ⓣ076 214690; Tues & Fri 8–11pm; B700–1000), and at Bangla Boxing Stadium, Thanon Bangla, Ao Patong (ⓣ076 345578; 5–11pm; B700–10000). The Saphan Hin stadium also offers *muay thai* training at their Suwit Gym (ⓣ076 381167, ⓦwww.bestmuaythai.com; B500/day or B2000/6-day course).

floored former shophouse in one of Phuket's most attractive traditional streets, this place is a little faded but full of character, traveller-friendly and good value. The dozen fan and air-con rooms are large and en suite – the best of them are up on the rooftop, affording unusual panoramic views. It's very popular, so you need to book ahead. Rates include breakfast. ②–③

Eating

Phuket town has much the largest concentration of good Thai food on the island, well worth making the effort for.

China Inn Café 20 Thanon Thalang. This Sino-Portuguese house has been stunningly renovated inside and out. The interior serves as a gallery and shop displaying Asian antiques, textiles and one-off artefacts, while the café occupies the tranquil enclosed garden and colonnade at the back, filled with tropical blooms and marble-top tables. The menu features classy Thai and Mediterranean food, including delicious mozzarella salads (B220), spicy Thai salads (from B120), and innovative juice mixes with tamarind and rambutan among others (B85). Mon–Sat 9am–6pm.

Dibuk Restaurant 69 Thanon Deebuk. Posh, expensive French food – including steaks, beef bourgignon and *moules* (mussels) – plus some Thai dishes, served in an attractive old Sino-Portuguese building. Daily 11am–11pm.

Ka Jok See 26 Thanon Takuapa ⓣ076 217903. A Phuket institution, housed in a beautiful restored traditional shophouse (unsigned) next to Ban Boran antiques shop, this place serves fabulous food and fosters a fun, sociable atmosphere. The menu is sophisticated, beautifully presented Thai food – their *goong sarong*, individual

△ Sino-Portuguese shophouse, Phuket town

shrimps bound in a crisp-noodle wrap, is famous island-wide – and although nearly all main dishes cost B280, every diner also gets a free starter and dessert. By about 10pm there is jiving between courses as staff take the lead and encourage locals and expats to have a boogie. Reservations are essential. Tues–Sun 6pm–1am.

Kanasutra 18 Thanon Takuapa. Contemporary Indian restaurant with a tandoor oven, serving everything from sheesh kebab to prawn vindaloo. Most dishes cost around B220. Nightly from 6pm.

La Gaetana 352 Thanon Phuket ☎076 250523. Welcoming Italian-Thai eatery whose menu includes home-made pasta with some great sauces, a special house fish stew, outstanding home-made ice creams – the durian ice cream is an acquired taste but worth the effort – and good-value wine by the glass (B90). Most mains cost B180. Mon, Tues & Fri noon–2pm & 6pm–late, Thurs, Sat & Sun 6pm–late.

Lemongrass 2/9 Thanon Dibuk. This popular, unpretentious, open-air plaza-garden restaurant, serves good, authentic, mid-priced Thai food – mountain fern salad, wing bean and banana-flower salad, lots of fish dishes and numerous curries – at reasonable prices (most are B80). Daily 5pm–1am.

Natural Restaurant (Thammachat) 62/5 Soi Putorn (Phoo Thon). Very popular with Phuket residents, this is a rambling, informal eatery whose open-sided dining rooms are wreathed in trailing plants. The well-priced food (B60–180) is great and includes fried sea bass with chilli paste, fried chicken with Muslim herbs, soft-shelled crab with garlic and pepper, and spicy Phuket bean salad. Tues–Sun 9am–midnight.

Phuket View Restaurant On Thanon Kaew Simbu near the top of Khao Rung, the wooded hill on the northwestern outskirts of town. Middle-class Phuketians drive up to this slightly formal restaurant for mid-priced outdoor seafood with a view. Bring mosquito repellent.

Salavatore's Restaurant 15 Thanon Rat Sada. Cosy Sardinian trattoria that's popular with expats. The authentic Italian menu (prices B150–650) includes crab-meat tagliatelle, spaghetti with bottarga (Mediterranean) caviar, various steaks and daily specials, plus around 60 different wines. Tues–Sun noon–3pm & 6.30–11pm.

Vegetarian Restaurants 207, 209 and 215 Thanon Ranong. A trio of cheap and simple vegan canteens, located almost side by side near Wat Jui Tui Chinese temple. For B20–30 you get two main-course servings and a plate of brown rice: choose from the trays of stir-fries and curries, many of them made with soya-based meat substitutes. Daily 7am to about 8pm.

Shopping

Phuket town has the best **bookshop** on the island: The Books (daily 9am–9pm) on Thanon Phuket stocks a phenomenal range of English-language volumes about Thailand plus some modern novels. South Wind Books on Thanon Phang Nga (Mon–Sat 9am–7pm, Sun 10am–3pm) has a big range of second-hand books.

Ngan Kin Jeh: the Vegetarian Festival

For nine days every October or November, at the start of the ninth lunar month (see ⓦwww.thailandgrandfestival.com for exact dates), the streets of Phuket are enlivened by **Ngan Kin Jeh** – the Vegetarian Festival – which culminates in the unnerving spectacle of men and women parading about with steel rods through their cheeks and tongues. The festival marks the beginning of **Taoist Lent**, a month-long period of purification observed by devout Chinese all over the world, but celebrated most ostentatiously in Phuket, by devotees of the island's five Chinese temples. After six days' abstention from meat (hence the festival's name), alcohol and sex, the white-clad worshippers flock to their local temple, where drum rhythms help induce a trance state in which they become possessed by spirits. As proof of their new-found transcendence of the physical world they skewer themselves with any available sharp instrument – fishing rods and car wing-mirrors have done service in the past – before walking over red-hot coals or up ladders of swords as further testament to their otherworldliness. In the meantime there's singing and dancing and almost continuous firework displays, with the grandest festivities held at Wat Jui Tui on Thanon Ranong in Phuket town.

The ceremony dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, when a travelling Chinese opera company turned up on the island to entertain emigrant Chinese working in the tin mines. They had been there almost a year when suddenly the whole troupe – together with a number of the miners – came down with a life-endangering fever. Realizing that they'd neglected their gods somewhat, the actors performed expiatory rites, which soon effected a cure for most of the sufferers. The festival has been held ever since, though the self-mortification rites are a later modification, possibly of Hindu origin.

Ban Boran Textiles, at 51 Thanon Yaowarat, specializes in clothes made from the handspun cotton of north and northeast Thailand, while for high-street **fashions**, there's Robinson department store on Thanon Tilok Utis 1, and Ocean Department Store nearby. For the biggest brand names, however, including Esprit, Lacoste and Jim Thompson silk, you need to head out to the cavernous **Central Festival shopping plaza** on the bypass at the western fringes of town, at the big intersection of roads to Phuket town, Ao Patong, and Ao Chalong; Patong- and Chalong-bound songthaews can drop you within a few hundred metres. Downtown, the two most fruitful shopping roads for **handicrafts** and **antiques** are Thanon Yaowarat and Thanon Rat Sada. On Thanon Rat Sada, Radsada Hand Made at no. 29 sells textiles, carved wooden textile hangers, mango-wood vases and silver jewellery, while both Soul of Asia at no. 37 and Touch Wood at no. 14 specialize in quality Southeast Asian antiques, fine art and furniture. Ocean Department Store's more mass-market souvenir stalls are also worth a browse.

Note that if you're planning to buy antiques or religious artefacts and take or send them home, you need to have an **export licence** granted by the Fine Arts Department, which can be obtained through Thalang Museum, located 12km north of Phuket town in Thalang (see p.417; ⓣ076 311426); see Basics p.76 for more information.

Listings

Airlines Bangkok Airways, 158/2–3 Thanon Yaowarat ⓣ076 225033; China Airlines, at the airport ⓣ076 327099; Dragon Air, 156/14 Thanon Phang Nga ⓣ076 215734; Korean Air, at the airport ⓣ076 328540; Malaysia Airlines, 1/8 Thanon Thungka ⓣ076 213749; Silk Air/Singapore Airlines, 1 Soi Surin ⓣ076 213895; Thai Airways, 78 Thanon Ranong, international ⓣ076 212499, domestic ⓣ076 211195.

Banks and exchange All the main banks have branches on Thanon Phang Nga or Thanon Rat Sada, with adjacent exchange facilities open till at least 7pm and ATMs dispensing cash around the clock.

Cinemas English-language blockbusters are shown throughout the day and evening at the Paradise Multiplex next to Ocean Department Store on Thanon Tilok Uthis 1 and the SF Coliseum inside the Central Festival shopping plaza on the bypass road.

Dentists At Phuket International Hospital (ⓣ076 249400, ⓦwww.phuket-inter-hospital.co.th), on the airport bypass road just west of Phuket town, and at Bangkok Hospital Phuket, on the northwestern edge of town at 2/1 Thanon Hongyok Utis ⓣ076 245425; see map on p.387 for locations.

Hospitals Phuket International Hospital (ⓣ076 249400, emergencies ⓣ076 210935, ⓦwww.phuket-inter-hospital.co.th), north of Central Festival shopping centre on the airport bypass road just west of Phuket town, at 44 Thanon Chalermprakiat Ror 9, is considered to have Phuket's best facilities, including an emergency department, an ambulance service and private rooms. Other reputable alternatives include Bangkok Hospital Phuket, on the northwestern edge of town just off Thanon Yaowarat at 2/1 Thanon Hongyok Utis ⓣ1719 or ⓣ076 245425, ⓦwww.phukethospital.com, and the Mission Hospital (aka Phuket Adventist Hospital), on the northern outskirts at 4/1 Thanon Thepkasatri ⓣ076 237220–5, emergencies ⓣ076 237227, ⓦphuketdir.com/missionhospital. See map on p.387 for locations.

Immigration office At the southern end of Thanon Phuket, in the suburb of Saphan Hin ⓣ076 221905; Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm, Sat 8.30–noon.

Internet access At several places on Thanon Thepkasatri, include cheap and fast at Goonet (Daily 10am-1am), at *On On Hotel*, 19 Thanon Phang Nga, and Catnet at the CAT phone office on Thanon Phang Nga (daily 8am–11pm).

Mail The GPO is on Thanon Montri. Poste restante should be addressed c/o GPO Thanon Montri, Phuket 83000 and can be collected Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm, Sat 8.30am–3.30pm.

Pharmacy There are branches of Boots on Soi Surin and in the Central Festival shopping centre, plus plenty of local pharmacies all over town.

TAT 191 Thanon Thalang (daily 8.30am–4.30pm ⓣ076 212213, ⓔtatphket@tat.or.th).

Telephones For international calls use the CAT phone office on Thanon Phang Nga (daily 8am–11pm).

Tourist Police For all emergencies, call the tourist police on the free, 24hr phone line ⓣ1155, or contact them at their office just north of Tesco Lotus on the northwest edge of town, on Route 402 ⓣ076 355015.

Hat Mai Khao

Phuket's northwest coast kicks off with the island's longest and least-visited beach, the seventeen-kilometre **HAT MAI KHAO**, which starts a couple of kilometres north of the airport and 34km northwest of Phuket town, and remains almost completely unsullied by any touristic enticements, with to date just a couple of discreet budget accommodations hidden behind a sandbank at the back of the shore, plus one deluxe development. Parts of Hat Mai Khao, and of Hat Nai Yang immediately to the south, are protected as **Sirinath National Park** (Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp), chiefly because a few giant marine turtles still come ashore here between October and February to lay their eggs (see box on p.505). Mai Khao is also a prime habitat of a much-revered but non-protected species – the sea grasshopper or sea louse, a tiny crustacean that's considered a great delicacy. Also within the national park is the **Thachatchai Nature Trail**, about 8km north from the Hat Mai Khao accommodation.

If you're looking for peace, solitude and 17km of soft sand to yourself, then the Hat Mai Khao **accommodation** is for you. At the far northern end of the beach, just 3km south of Sarasin Bridge, the five-star *JW Marriott Phuket Resort and Spa* (Ⓣ076 338000, Ⓦwww.marriotthotels.com; ⑨) comprises an enormous low-rise complex of tasteful, upmarket rooms, three pools, a spa complex and several restaurants. It's popular with families not least because kids love the water slide; there's also a kids' centre with pool table and Internet, and the hotel rents out mountain bikes for local expeditions. Several kilometres further south along the beach, the other two options are much cheaper and more traveller-oriented and are by far the most uncommercialized places to stay on Phuket. Run by members of the same family, they occupy adjacent plots in their own little shorefront enclave, surrounded by coconut plantations 1.5km off the road, with easy access to nearby wetlands and their large bird populations. *Phuket Campground* (Ⓣ081 676 4318, Ⓦwww.phuketcampground.com) rents out tents with bedding (B150/person), which you can either set up near their small restaurant or move down onto the beach a few metres away beyond the sandbank. On the other side of a small shrimp-breeding pond, *Mai Khao Beach Bungalows* (Ⓣ081 895 1233; ⑤) has just a few bungalows with fan and en-suite bathrooms. Both places offer an exceptionally warm, homestay-like welcome, both serve food and can arrange motorbike rental, and both close during the monsoon season (May–Oct) when wind and rain make it dangerous to swim.

The easiest way to get to Hat Mai Khao is by long-distance **bus**. All buses travelling between Phuket town bus station and any mainland town (eg Krabi, Phang Nga, Khao Lak or Surat Thani) use Highway 402: just ask to be dropped in **BAN SOUN MAPRAO**, a road junction just north of kilometre-stone 37. (If coming directly here from the mainland you'll waste a good couple of hours if you go into town and then come back out again.) Five songthaews a day also travel this far up Highway 402, but buses are faster and more frequent. The owner of *Phuket Campground* has an office at the bus drop on the east side of the road in Ban Soun Maprao, from where you can arrange transfers to the accommodation, but if the office isn't open you can either phone for a pick-up or walk. From the bus drop, walk 1km west down the minor road until you reach a signed track off to the west, which you should follow for 1.5km to reach the accommodation and the beach. Travelling to Hat Mai Khao from the airport, 15km away, is best done by taxi.

Thachatchai Nature Trail

Snaking through the mangroves at Phuket's northern tip, 700m south of the Sarasin Bridge exit to the mainland, the **Thachatchai Nature Trail** (dawn to dusk;

free) aims to introduce visitors to life in a mangrove swamp (for more on which, see the colour section on Ao Phang Nga). It's run by the Sirinath National Park and is located east off Highway 402, across the road from the old national park headquarters (now relocated to Hat Nai Yang); any bus travelling between Phuket town and the mainland should drop you at the sign. There's a visitor centre at the trailhead, where you can pick up a leaflet, and a drinks stall next door. The six-hundred-metre **trail** follows a raised wooden walkway that loops through a patch of coastal mangrove swamp. Informative English-language boards describe the flora and fauna: you can't fail to spot the swarms of fiddler crabs scuttling around the roots of the mangrove trees, and the "bok-bok" sound that you can hear above the roar of the distant highway is the noise the mangrove-dwelling shrimps make when they snap their pincers as they feed – they're the ones that give the distinctive taste to the green papaya salad, *som tam*.

Hat Nai Yang

The long curved sweep of **HAT NAI YANG**, 5km south of Hat Mai Khao and 30km north of Phuket town, is partly under the protection of Sirinath National Park and has only fairly low-key development, with plentiful shade from the feathery casuarina trees that run the length of the bay, and a tiny, low-rise tourist village of transport rental outlets, minimarkets, a few accommodation options, an Internet centre and the inevitable tailors' shops. Nai Yang is locally famous for its two-dozen little open-air restaurant-shacks that serve mostly barbecued seafood (and the odd wood-fired pizza) at tables on the sand: eating out here is a hugely popular weekend pastime with Phuket families. There are also a few little beach bars, including the strikingly style-conscious beachfront bar, *The Beach Club*, along the shoreside track at the southern end of the bay, which plays live music nightly from 8pm and hosts weekly parties. The beach is clean and good for swimming at the southern end, and there's a reasonable, shallow **reef** about 1km offshore (10min by longtail boat) from the national park headquarters, which are a fifteen-minute walk north of the tourist village. If you're staying here and have your own transport, you could make a trip to the Thachatchai Nature Trail (see p.397).

Practicalities

Accommodation is pleasingly limited on Hat Nai Yang. The cheapest and most peaceful place to stay is at the national park bungalows (ⓣ076 328226, ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp; ③–⑤), prettily set out under the trees on a very quiet stretch of beach (unswimmable at low tide) fifteen minutes' walk north from the tourist village. Two-person fan and air-con rooms and bungalows are basic but en suite, and must be booked in advance. Tents are also available for B200 and can be pitched anywhere you like; if you bring your own you must first get permission from the park headquarters or visitor centre (both daily 8.30am–4.30pm). *Nai Yang Beach Resort* (ⓣ076 328300, ⓦwww.naiyangbeachresort.com; fan ⑥, air-con ⑥–⑧) in the heart of the tourist village has a range of neat, white-tiled, white-walled mid-market bungalows set in a dry but shady garden on the inland side of the beachfront road, and offers a choice between fan and air-con. Best of the lot is the elegant and luxurious *Indigo Pearl* (ⓣ076 327006, ⓦwww.indigo-pearl.com; ⑨) where hotel rooms and villas furnished in chic modern-Thai style look on to gorgeously landscaped tropical gardens that run down to the southern end of the beachfront road; facilities here include three swimming pools and a kids' playground.

Hat Nai Yang is just 2km south of the airport, B150 by taxi. An infrequent songthaew service (B35; 1hr 45min) runs between Phuket town and Hat Nai Yang via the airport, or a taxi costs around B600.

Hat Nai Thon

The next bay south down the coast from Hat Nai Yang is the small but perfectly formed **Hat Nai Thon**, currently one of the least commercialized beaches on the island. The five-hundred-metre-long gold-sand bay is shaded by casuarinas and surrounded by fields and plantations of coconut, banana, pineapple and rubber trees, all set against a dazzling backdrop of lush green hills. The access road off Highway 402 winds through this landscape, passing a few villages en route before reaching the shore, and to date there are just a handful of formal places to stay at the beach, plus a couple of businesses with rooms for rent, a dive operator, tour agent, several restaurants and bars. There's good snorkelling at reefs that are easily reached by longtail, but otherwise you'll have to make your own entertainment. All this might change quite soon, however, as land speculation south along the coast from Nai Thon has been feverish and development is likely to follow. There's no public transport to Nai Thon, but half-hourly **songthaews** (B25; 1hr 30min) run from Phuket town to Ao Bang Tao, the next resort south down the coast, from where a taxi which will cost at least B150.

At the northern end of the shorefront road, across the road from the sea, the three-storeyed *Naithonburi Beach Resort* (Ⓣ076 318700, Ⓦwww.naithonburi.com; ⑨) is the largest **hotel** in Nai Thon, with 79 posh air-con rooms in a U-shaped complex enclosing a decent-sized pool. Next door, *Phuket Naithon Resort* (Ⓣ076 205233, Ⓦwww.phuketnaithonresort.com; fan ⑥, air-con ⑥–⑧) offers big, apartment-style rooms in terraced bungalows with the choice between pleasing mountain views or (less interesting) across-the-road sea views, and the option of air-con, balcony and TV; the resort also has a small spa. About 100m south down the road, *Naithon Beach Resort* (Ⓣ076 205379, Ⓔnaithon_beach_resort@yahoo.com; ⑥), set in a small garden across the road from the beach, has just 16 compact wooden fan and air-con bungalows with more character but lesser views and a teeny swimming pool squeezed alongside. The nearby *Tienseng* restaurant (Ⓣ081 535 0512; ⑥) has about ten fan and air-con rooms upstairs, some with sea view. About two kilometres south over the southern headland, occupying cliffside land that runs down to its own gorgeous wee bay of white sand and turquoise water, *Andaman White Beach Resort* (Ⓣ076 316300, Ⓦwww.andamanwhitebeach.com; B5500) offers a range of attractive, upmarket rooms and villas with surpassing views, including some designed for families, plus a swimming pool.

Ao Bang Tao

The eight-kilometre-long **AO BANG TAO** is dominated by the upscale *Laguna Resort*, an "integrated resort" comprising five luxury hotels set in extensive landscaped grounds around a series of lagoons. There's free transport between the hotels, and for a small fee all *Laguna* guests can use facilities at any one of the five hotels – which include fifteen swimming pools, thirty restaurants, several children's clubs, a couple of spas and countless sporting facilities ranging from tennis courts to riding stables, windsurfers, and Hobie Cats to badminton courts. There's also the eighteen-hole Laguna Phuket golf course, the Quest Laguna outdoor sports centre and a kids' activity centre called Camp Laguna, with entertainments for 8- to 18-year-olds ranging from abseiling and rock-climbing to team games and arts and crafts workshops. Not surprisingly the *Laguna* hotels are exceptionally popular with families, though beware of the undertow off the coast here, which confines many guests to the hotel pools. South and mainly out of sight of the enormous *Laguna* complex, an unsightly jumble of development has been squashed into every remaining inch of Bang Tao's beachfront land. Half-hourly **songthaews** (B25; 1hr 15min) cover the 24km from Phuket town to Ao Bang

Tao; taxis cost about B250 for the same journey. There are reputable **car-rental** desks at all the hotels, as well as small shopping arcades.

Accommodation

All *Laguna Phuket* **hotels** are in the top price bracket: the *Allamanda* and *Laguna Beach* have the cheapest rooms and the *Banyan Tree Phuket* is the most exclusive option on the beach (and the whole island). The rates quoted below are generally discounted a little if you book via the *Laguna Phuket* website (ⓦwww.lagunaphuket.com), and rates drop by up to fifty percent during the low season, from May to October.

Allamanda ⓣ076 324359, ⓦwww.allamanda.com. Consciously family-oriented hotel comprising 235 apartment-style suites – all with a kitchenette and separate living area at the very least – set round the edge of a lagoon and the fringes of the golf course. There are some special children's suites, children's pools, a kids' club and a babysitting service. ⑧

Banyan Tree Phuket ⓣ076 324374, ⓦwww.banyantree.phuket.com. The most sumptuous and exclusive of the Laguna hotels, and considered among the best hotels in the whole of Phuket, with a select 108 villas, all gorgeously furnished and kitted out with private gardens and outdoor sunken baths. Also on site are the award-winning, and gloriously indulgent, Banyan Tree spa and an eighteen-hole golf course. Rates from US$700. ⑨

Dusit Laguna ⓣ076 324324, ⓦphuket.dusit.com. Located between two lagoons and set amidst lush tropical gardens fronting the beach, all rooms in this relaxed, low-rise complex have private balconies with pleasant views. Many rooms have broadband access and even the beach is wi-fi enabled. Other facilities include a spa, a pool and a kids' club. ⑨

Laguna Beach Resort ⓣ076 324352, ⓦwww.lagunabeach-resort.com. Another family-oriented hotel, with a big waterpark, lots of sports facilities, Camp Laguna activities for 8–18-year-olds, plus a spa and luxury five-star rooms in the low-rise hotel wings. ⑨

Sheraton Grande Laguna ⓣ076 324101, ⓦwww.sheraton.phuket.com. Built on its own island in the middle of one of the lagoons, with exceptionally nice five-star rooms, a long, serpentine pool featuring a waterfall and children's pool, a Very Important Kids club, and nine bars and restaurants. Some rooms are designed for wheelchair access. Rates from US$245. ⑨

Hat Surin and Ao Pansea

South of Ao Bang Tao, **HAT SURIN** proper is packed with ugly condominium developments, but its small northern bay, secluded from the riff-raff and sometimes referred to as **AO PANSEA**, is a favourite haunt of royalty and Hollywood stars, who stay here at one of Phuket's most indulgent resorts, the *Amanpuri* (ⓣ076 324333, ⓦwww.amanresorts.com; ⑨; rates start at US$700). Part of the super-exclusive, Hong Kong-based Aman chain, the *Amanpuri* comprises a series of private, elegantly understated, Thai-style pavilions, each of which is staffed by a personal attendant, plus a spa and black marble swimming pool. Also on pretty, white-sand Ao Pansea is the delightful, and slightly more reasonably priced, *The Chedi Phuket* (ⓣ076 324017, ⓦwww.ghmhotels.com; ⑨; rates from B14,700), whose traditional-style thatched villas are set within a lushly planted hillside palm grove that drops down to the shore. There's also a spa and shorefront pool.

Songthaews travel the 24km between Phuket town and Hat Surin, via Hat Kamala, approximately every half-hour and cost B25.

Hat Kamala and Laem Singh

With its cheerfully painted houses and absence of high-rises, the small, village-like tourist development along the shorefront of **HAT KAMALA** is an appealingly low-key spot, sandwiched between the beach and the predominantly Muslim little town of Ban Kamala, about 300m west of the main Patong-Surin road and 26km northwest of Phuket town. Although Kamala was very badly hit by the tsunami – which killed many residents and wiped out the school, the temple and countless homes and businesses – extensive rebuilding (still a work-in-progress at the southern end) has enabled it to resurface as an enticing tourist destination once more. Aside from the accommodation, the little tourist village, which is mostly clustered either side of Thanon Rim Had (also spelt Rim Hat), has several restaurants and bars, transport rental, Internet access, a couple of minimarkets, dive shops and several tour operators. For anything else you'll need to head inland to the faceless shophouse developments on the main road, or continue south around the headland to Ao Patong, 6km away. The Phuket Fantasea entertainments complex (see box on p.393) is about 1km northeast of Hat Kamala on the main Patong-Surin road. A few hundred metres north of Fantasea, a couple of steep paths lead west off the main road and down to **Laem Singh** cape, a pretty little sandy cove whose picturesque combination of turquoise water and smooth granite boulders makes it one of Phuket's finest. It's good for swimming and very secluded, plus it's great for kids as there's a decent patch of shade throughout the day. The easiest way to get to Hat Kamala is by **songthaew** from Phuket town (every 30min, 1hr 15min; B30). Tuk tuks charge B200 between Patong and Kamala or motorbike taxis will take you there for B150.

Accommodation and eating

Hat Kamala is popular with long-stay tourists, and several **hotels** offer rooms with kitchenettes; on the whole prices here are reasonable for Phuket, and there's a preponderance of small-scale places. The most famous **restaurant** in Kamala is Australian-run *Rockfish*, which enjoys an island-wide reputation for great food – mostly Asian fusion and seafood, with dishes averaging B200 – and lovely views from its headland location attached to *Kamala Beach Estate*. Down in the heart of the tourist village, there are several other seafood-oriented restaurants to try out, while the breezy roof terrace and fresh coffee make *Kamala Coffee House* a good spot for breakfast.

Benjamin Resort 83 Thanon Rim Had, at the southerly end of the beachfront road Ⓣ076 385147, Ⓦwww.phuketdir.com/benjaminresort. Set right on the beach, this block of 35 air-con rooms lacks character but couldn't be closer to the sea. Although views are occluded from all but the most expensive rooms, the spacious interiors are almost identical and no more than a few footsteps from the sand. ④–⑦

Kamala Beach Estate Ⓣ076 279756, Ⓦwww.kamalabeachestate.com. Stunningly located on Hat Kamala's far southern headland (above a stretch of bay that's unswimmable at low tide, though just five minutes' walk from the more serviceable shore) and set around a swimming pool in tropical gardens, this place comprises serviced one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments – garden- or sea-view – each furnished with a well-equipped kitchen, dining area and balcony or terrace. ⑨

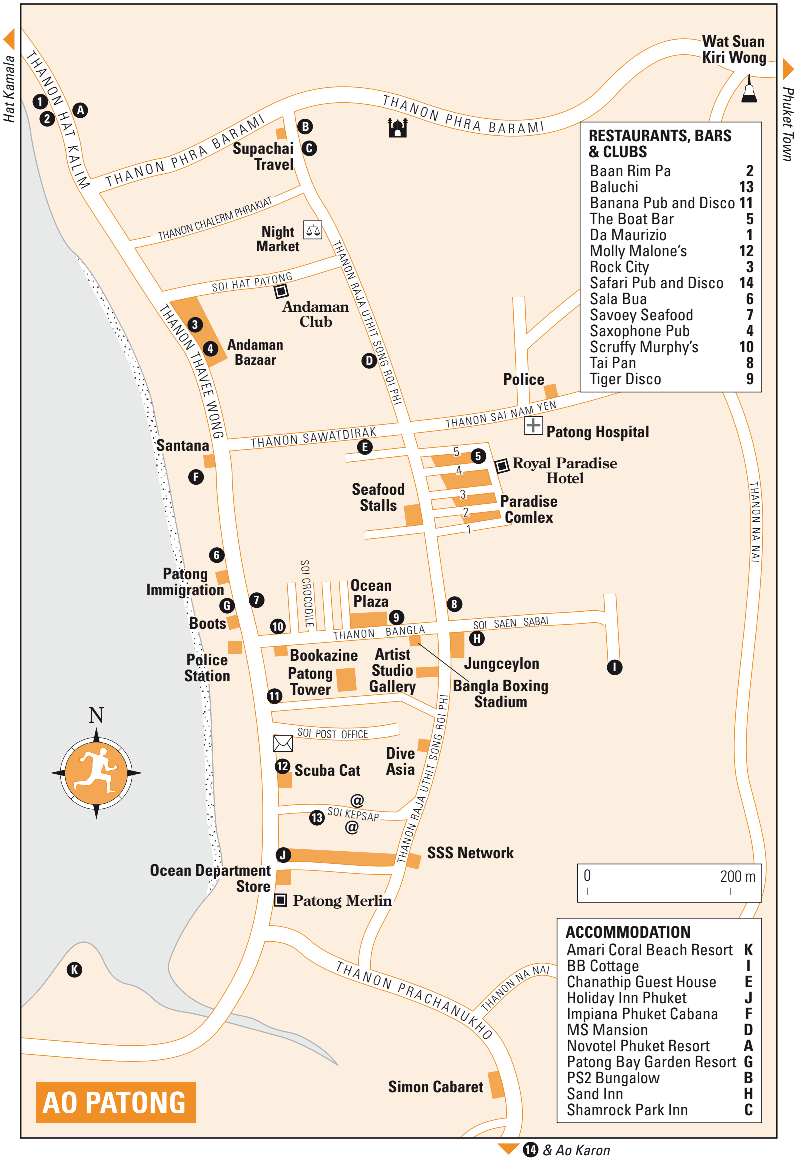
Kamala Dreams 74/1 Thanon Rim Had Ⓣ076 279131, Ⓦwww.kamaladreams.net. Epitomizing all the best things about Kamala, this is a really nice, small hotel set right on the shore, in the middle of the tourist village. Its 18 rooms are large and stylishly furnished in contemporary mode, and all have air-con, TV, a kitchenette and a large balcony overlooking the pool and the sea. ⑧

Malinee House 75/4 Thanon Rim Had Ⓣ086 600 4616, Ⓦwww.malineehouse.com. Very friendly, traveller-oriented guest house in the middle of the tourist village, with Internet access and the Jackie Lee travel agency downstairs, and large, comfortably furnished air-con rooms upstairs, all of them with balconies. ⑤

Print Kamala Resort 74/8 Thanon Rim Had Ⓣ076 385396, Ⓦprint-kamala-resort.th66.com. The best accommodation here is in a village-like complex of very generously sized bungalows, connected via stilted walkways that wend around a tropical Bali-style garden. The bungalows all have prettily furnished air-con bedrooms plus separate living rooms, with TV, and capacious, shaded decks. The pricier ones are detached. The hotel also has some less interesting rooms in a hotel wing, and a large pool. ⑧

Ao Patong

The busiest and most popular of all Phuket's beaches, **AO PATONG** – 5km south of Ao Kamala and 15km west of Phuket town – is vastly over-developed and hard to recommend. A congestion of high-rise hotels, tour agents and souvenir shops disfigures the beachfront road, tireless touts are everywhere, and hostess bars and


Hat Kamala
Phuket Town
Wat Suan Kiri Wong
THANON HAT KALIM
THANON PHRA BARAMI
THANON PHRA BARAMI
Supachai Travel
THANON CHALERM PHRAKIAT
Night Market
SOI HAT PATONG
Andaman Club
Andaman Bazaar
THANON THAVEE WONG
THANON RAJA UTHIT SONG ROI PHI
Police
THANON SAI NAM YEN
Patong Hospital
THANON SAWATDIRAK
Santana
Royal Paradise Hotel
Seafood Stalls
Paradise Comlex
5
4
3
2
1
THANON NA NAI
Patong Immigration
SOI CROCODILE
Ocean Plaza
Boots
THANON BANGLA
SOI SAEN SABAI
Police Station
Bookazine
Patong Tower
Artist Studio Gallery
Jungceylon
Bangla Boxing Stadium
N
SOI POST OFFICE
Dive Asia
Scuba Cat
SOI KEPSAP
SSS Network
Ocean Department Store
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THANON PRACHANUKHO
THANON NA NAI
Simon Cabaret
AO PATONG
14 & Ao Karon
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13
A B C D E F G H I J K

RESTAURANTS, BARS & CLUBS

Baan Rim Pa	2
Baluchi	13
Banana Pub and Disco	11
The Boat Bar	5
Da Maurizio	1
Molly Malone's	12
Rock City	3
Safari Pub and Disco	14
Sala Bua	6
Savoey Seafood	7
Saxophone Pub	4
Scruffy Murphy's	10
Tai Pan	8
Tiger Disco	9

ACCOMMODATION

Amari Coral Beach Resort	K
BB Cottage	I
Chanathip Guest House	E
Holiday Inn Phuket	J
Impiana Phuket Cabana	F
MS Mansion	D
Novotel Phuket Resort	A
Patong Bay Garden Resort	G
PS2 Bungalow	B
Sand Inn	H
Shamrock Park Inn	C

strip joints dominate the resort's nightlife, attracting an increasing number of single Western men to what is now the most active scene between Bangkok and Hat Yai. On the plus side, the broad, three-kilometre-long beach offers good sand and plenty of shade beneath the parasols and there are hundreds of shops and bars to keep you busy after dark.

Practicalities

Songthaews from Phuket town's Thanon Ranong (every 15min 6am–6pm; 20min; B20) approach Patong from the northeast, driving south along Thanon Thavee Wong as far as the *Patong Merlin*, where they usually wait for a while to pick up passengers for the return trip to Phuket town. A **tuk-tuk** or **taxi** from Patong to Ao Karon will set you back about B200, but a **motorbike taxi** from one part of Patong to another should only cost B30–40 (the main motorbike taxi stand is in front of the *Holiday Inn*). SMT/National **car rental** (ⓣ076 340608, ⓦwww.smtrentacar.com) has a desk inside the *Holiday Inn*; the local Budget agent is at the nearby *Patong Merlin* (ⓣ076 292389, ⓦwww.budget.co.th); or you can rent jeeps or motorbikes from the transport touts who hang out along Thanon Thavee Wong. Every transport and tour agent in Patong can provide a taxi service **to the airport** for about B400, but a cheaper alternative for solo travellers is the hourly minibus service operated by Supachai Travel at 26/1 Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi (ⓣ076 340046), which does hotel pick-ups between 6am and 6pm and charges B150 per person.

Most of the **tour agents** and **dive operators** have offices on the southern stretch of Thanon Thavee Wong: see the box on p.392 for a roundup of available day-trips and activities, and the box on pp.408–09 for diving details. There are private **Internet** centres on all the main roads in the resort, which charge much less than the business centres in the top hotels, and a small **post office** on Thanon Thavee Wong (Mon–Sat 11am–6pm). The **police station** is on Thanon Thavee Wong, across from the west end of Thanon Bangla, and the Patong branch of Phuket's **Immigration** office (for visa extensions; Mon–Fri 10am–noon & 1–3pm; ⓣ076 340477) is a few doors north up the same road, next to *Sala Bua*

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△ Songthaew to Ao Patong

restaurant. Bookazine on Thanon Bangla carries a good range of English-language **books** about Asia, plus novels and magazines, and the cavernous The Artist Studio Gallery on Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi, with access also via Thanon Thavee Wong (Ⓦwww.phuketisland.info/artist-studio-phuket/gallery.htm), is as good a place as any on Phuket to buy **paintings**.

Accommodation

Moderately priced accommodation on Patong is poor value and during high season it's almost impossible to find a vacant room for less than ⑤. Some of the best-value, mid-range places are at the far northern end of Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi, beneath the hill road that brings everyone in from town, a 750-metre walk from the central shopping and entertainment area, but only 100m from the sea. Patong's **upmarket** hotels are generally better value, and many occupy prime sites on beachfront Thavee Wong. If you're travelling with **kids**, consider staying at the *Holiday Inn*, which has some specially furnished children's bedrooms and a kids' club as well, or the *Novotel Phuket Resort*, which has some of the most child-friendly facilities on the island.

High season here runs from November to April, but during the crazy fortnight over Christmas and New Year, when rooms should be reserved well in advance, most places add a supplementary charge of 25 percent. Every hotel drops its prices during the low season, when discounts of up to fifty percent on the rates listed are on offer.

Inexpensive and moderate

BB Cottage 17/21 Soi Saen Sabai Ⓣ076 342948, Ⓔppppropt@loxinfo.co.th. A rare thing indeed in Patong: 29 lowish-budget bungalows dotted around a peaceful green oasis of a garden. Admittedly, interiors are plain – though they are large, and some have kitchens – and there are no verandas, but there's a sense of space and you're close to the nightlife yet a little bit secluded. For a fee, guests can also use a nearby swimming pool. Fan ④, air-con ⑤–⑥

Chanathip Guest House Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi Soi Neung Ⓣ081 787 2537, Ⓔbaby-ingfar@hotmail.com. This tiny mansion block contains just a handful of good, modern rooms, all with air-con, stylish furnishings and a balcony. Rooms on the upper floors get more light. ⑤

MS Mansion 132 Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi Ⓣ076 344394, Ⓔmsinnphuket@hotmail.com. A small hotel above a restaurant, offering large, clean, air-con rooms, the best of them with balconies. ⑤

PS2 Bungalow 78/54 Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi Ⓣ076 342207, Ⓦwww.ps2bungalow.com. This well-managed mini-hotel has sizeable and well-priced if slightly scruffy fan and air-con bungalows set around a swimming pool and garden area. It's at the far northern end of the resort, so a fair walk from the main shopping and bar areas. Fan ④, air-con ⑤

Sand Inn 171 Soi Saen Sabai Ⓣ076 340275, Ⓦwww.sandinnphuket.com. Clean, well-appointed air-con rooms, a little on the compact side, but maintained to a good standard in the ideal location for nightlife, just east off bar-packed Thanon Bangla. There's TV in all rooms, a Euro Café bakery downstairs, and use of the small swimming pool just a few metres up the soi. ⑦

Shamrock Park Inn 31 Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi Ⓣ076 340991. Friendly, reasonable value three-storey hotel at the northern end of the resort with 28 pleasant, well-maintained, air-con rooms, most of them with balconies. Unlike many places it doesn't raise its rates for Christmas and New Year. ⑤

Expensive

Amari Coral Beach Resort 104 Thanon Traitrang Ⓣ076 340106, Ⓦwww.amari.com. Occupying its own secluded little beach on a headland at the southernmost end of the bay, the Phuket branch of Thailand's upmarket Amari chain offers contemporary-chic rooms, all with generous sea-view balconies, plus two swimming pools, gorgeously romantic spa facilities, a fitness centre and tennis courts, as well as several restaurants. The views are exceptional and the location peaceful but convenient; as it's ranged up a slope it's not ideal for guests with mobility problems. ⑨

Holiday Inn Phuket 86/11 Thanon Thavee Wong Ⓣ076 340608, Ⓦwww.phuket.holiday-inn.com. Reliable, upmarket chain hotel that offers smart, contemporary rooms just across the road from the beach, in two differently styled wings, and fosters a relaxed and informal atmosphere. The poshest Busakorn villa rooms have their own interconnected plunge-pools and there are also large pools for each wing, plus several restaurants and an interesting programme of daily activities. The hotel makes a big effort to be family-friendly, with special "kidsuites" (bedrooms designed for children) and both an all-day kids' club and a teens' club, with two children's pools. Also offers nonsmoking and wheelchair-accessible rooms. ⑨

Impiana Phuket Cabana 94 Thanon Thavee Wong ⓣ076 340138, ⓦwww.impiana.com. Located right on the beach and in the heart of the resort, this is a gorgeous collection of very tastefully designed air-con cabanas, set around a garden swimming pool; also has a kids' pool and a spa. ⑨

Novotel Phuket Resort Thanon Phra Barami / Thanon Hat Kalim ⓣ076 342777, ⓦwww.novotelphuket.com. Luxurious and relaxing chain hotel built on the hillside above the quieter, northern end of the beach. Occupying landscaped tropical gardens and offering fine sea views, it's especially popular with families as it offers heaps of activities as well as a kids' club with games, videos and craft-making. Other facilities include three restaurants and a multi-level swimming pool. ⑨

Patong Bay Garden Resort 33/1 Thanon Thavee Wong ⓣ076 340297, ⓦwww.patongbaygarden.com. Small hotel set right on the beach, with the top "studio" rooms having uninterrupted sea views, quite unusual in central Patong. Other rooms look out on the small shorefront pool or have no view at all. Rooms are quite elegantly furnished and all have air-con and TV. ⑧–⑨

Eating

Much of the **food** on Patong is dire – low-grade microwaved slop sold at inflated prices. But in among the disastrous little cafés advertising everything from Hungarian to Swedish "home cooking" you'll find a few genuinely reputable, long-running favourites. Phone numbers are given where reservations are advisable. For cheap Thai food, try the night market that sets up around 5pm towards the northern end of Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi, just south of Thanon Chalerm Phrakiat, or the row of seafood stall-restaurants further south, opposite the *Royal Paradise Hotel* complex.

Baan Rim Pa Across from the *Novotel* at 223 Thanon Phra Barami/Thanon Hat Kalim ⓣ076 340789, ⓦwww.baanrimpa.com. One of Phuket's most famous fine-dining restaurants, this is an elegant spot that's beautifully set in a teak building on a clifftop overlooking the bay, with tables also on its sea-view terrace. Known for its classic, expensive, "Royal Thai" cuisine (mains B250–500), including banana blossom salad, creamy duck curry and fried tiger prawns with tamarind sauce, as well as for its cellar of more than 270 wines. Live jazz-piano nightly except Mondays. Advance booking advised.

Baluchi Inside the *Horizon Beach Hotel* on Soi Kepsap. One of the better Indian restaurants in the resort, specializing in North Indian cuisine and tandoori dishes – roganjosh kashmiri lamb (B220), tandoori prawns (B375) – with fixed-price menus for B300 and B500.

Da Maurizio Across from the *Novotel* at 223 Thanon Phra Barami/ Thanon Hat Kalim ⓣ076 344079, ⓦwww.damaurizio.com. Superior, expensive, Italian restaurant in a stunning location set over the rocks beside the sea. Serves authentic home-made pasta and antipasti (bacon-wrapped goats cheese, rock lobster salad), fabulous seafood (Phuket lobsters and black crabs from Phang Nga), and a good wine list. Recipes are now collected in a book sold on the island. Main dishes from B450. Reservations advisable.

Savoey Seafood On the central stretch of Thanon Thavee Wong, just north of Thanon Bangla. Cavernous, unatmospheric but very popular open-sided restaurant that serves all manner of locally caught fish and seafood (dishes from B180), particularly Phuket lobster, cooked to Thai, Chinese and Western recipes.

Sala Bua Thanon Thavee Wong. Fabulously stylish, breezy, beach-view restaurant attached to the equally glamorous *Impiana Phuket Cabana* hotel. The innovative, pricey, Pacific Rim menu (B200–1400) includes ravioli stuffed with mud crabs, local rock-lobster omelette, New Zealand tenderloin steaks – and sweet sushi rolls filled with mango and coconut cream. Expensive, but worth it.

Nightlife and entertainment

After dark, everyone heads to pedestrianized Thanon Bangla for their own taste of Patong's notorious **nightlife** and the road teems with a cross-section of Phuket tourists, from elderly couples and young parents with strollers, to glammed-up girlfriends and groups of lads. The big draw for the more innocent onlookers is Thanon Bangla's Soi Crocodile, better known as Soi Katoey, or "Trannie Alley", where pouting, barely clad transvestites jiggle their implants on podiums at the mouth of the soi and pose for photos with giggling tourists (B200 a shot). But the real action happens further down the many bar-filled sois shooting off Thanon Bangla, where open-air bar-beers and neon-lit go-go clubs packed with strippers and goggle-eyed punters pulsate through the night. The pick-up trade pervades most bars in Patong, and though many of these joints are welcoming enough to couples and female tourists, there are a few alternatives, listed below, for anyone not in that kind of mood.

The **gay** entertainment district is concentrated around the Paradise Complex, a network of small sois and dozens of bar-beers in front of *Royal Paradise Hotel* on Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi: see Ⓦwww.gaypatong.com.com for events listings and details of the annual Gay Pride festival, which is usually held in early February.

If you're looking for something else to do with yourself (or your kids) in the evening, check out the nearby transvestite Simon Cabaret, the spectacular show at Phuket Fantasea, or the Thai boxing stadium on Thanon Bangla; see the box on pp.392–93 for details.

Banana Pub and Disco Inside the Patong Beach Hotel complex at 124 Thanon Thavee Wong. The upstairs disco and street-level bar attract a mixed clientele of Thais, expats, tourists and the inevitable freelance bar girls. The B100 entry fee includes one free drink. Nightly from 9pm.

The Boat Bar Soi 5, Paradise Complex, off Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi. Long-running, very popular gay bar and disco, with two cabaret shows nightly. Opens daily from 8pm.

Molly Malone's Next to *McDonald's* on Thanon Thavee Wong. As you'd expect, the resort's original Irish pub serves draught Guinness and Kilkenny beer (B250 a pint), dishes out bar food and all-day breakfasts, and entertains drinkers with live Celtic music every night from 9pm; also shows live TV coverage of international sports. There's a nice beer garden and no overt hostess presence. Daily from 10am.

Rock City Andaman Bazaar complex Thanon Thavee Wong. A roster of heavy-metal bands – including Metallica and AC/DC tribute acts – entertain drinkers and diners here nightly. Daily from 5pm.

Safari Pub and Disco Just beyond the southern edge of Patong, between Simon Cabaret and the Le Meridien hotel at 28 Thanon Siriat. Decked out to look like a jungle theme park, complete with waterfalls and five different bars, this is one of the most popular dance venues on Phuket, with two bands playing nightly from around 9pm; the music fuses disco beats from the 1980s with more recent techno sets. Nightly from 8pm.

Saxophone Pub 188/2 Andaman Bazaar complex Thanon Thavee Wong. The Phuket branch of Bangkok's famous long-running jazz pub fosters a similar ambience with lots of rough timber interior, portraits of chilled musicians and nightly live jazz, blues, funk and soul from 9pm–2am. Nightly from 6pm.

Scruffy Murphy's Thanon Bangla. Like *Molly Malone*'s around the corner, this is one of the few bars in Patong where you stand a decent chance of not being hassled by hostesses. Here too there's Guinness and Kilkenny on tap, nightly live music from 9pm, sports TV, and some outdoor seating from which to enjoy the Bangla parade. Also does pub-style food. Daily from 11am.

Tai Pan Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi. Crowded disco-bar playing loud techno and disco hits to a dance floor packed with typical Patong party animals. Nightly from 9pm.

Tiger Disco Thanon Bangla. By midnight, the upstairs disco in this complex of bar-beers and go-go bars is packed with a mixed crowd of tourists, freelancers and punters. You can't miss the entrance, with its huge moulded jungle trees and rocks, plus the trademark larger-than-life tiger sculptures. B100 entry includes one free drink. Nightly from 9pm.

Ao Karon

AO KARON, Phuket's second resort after Patong, is very much a middle-of-the-road destination. Far less lively, or congested, than Patong, but more commercial – and less characterful – than the smaller beaches further north, it's the domain of affordable guest houses and package-tour hotels and appeals chiefly to mid-budget tourists, many of them from Scandinavia. The 2.5-kilometre-long **beach** is graced with squeaky soft golden sand and is completely free of developments, though there's very little natural shade; an embankment screens most of the southern half of the beach from the road running alongside, but north of the *Hilton* the road is more often in view and parts of the shore back onto lagoons and wasteland. The **undertow** off Ao Karon is treacherously strong during the monsoon season from June to October, so you should heed the warning signs and flags and ask for local advice – fatalities are not uncommon. The tiny bay just north of Ao Karon – known as Karon Noi or Relax Bay – is almost exclusively patronized by guests of the swanky *Le Meridien* hotel, but non-guests are quite welcome to swim and sunbathe here.

For inland entertainment, there's the Dino Park **mini-golf** (daily 10am–midnight; B240, kids B180, or B120/90 without the golf), next to Marina Phuket Resort on the Kata/Karon headland, which is part of a pseudo-prehistoric theme park comprising a dinosaur restaurant and an erupting "volcano". For theatrical entertainment, try an evening at the nearby transvestite Simon Cabaret or the spectacular show at Phuket Fantasea, both of which are described in the box on p.393. Some of the posher hotels on Phuket's other beaches offer expensive **spa treatments** to their guests, but on Karon anyone is welcome to the Kata Spa, near Peach Hill at 95 Thanon Pakbang (Ⓣ086 541 3629, Ⓦwww.katabeachsparesort.com), where local herbs are used in all steam baths and massage treatments and multi-treatment packages cost from B1400; Kata Spa also teaches **courses in Thai massage**.

Practicalities

Ao Karon (see map on p.412) is 20km southwest of Phuket town and served by **songthaews** from the Thanon Ranong terminal (every 20min; 30min; B25). They arrive in Karon via Thanon Patak, hitting the beach at the northern end of Ao Karon and then driving south along beachfront Thanon Karon, continuing over the headland as far as *Kata Beach Resort* on Ao Kata Yai. To catch a songthaew back into town, just stand on the other side of the road and flag one down. If you're aiming for accommodation on Thanon Taina, you can save yourself at least ten minutes by getting off at the songthaew drop signed "Kata Beach", just north of the post office on Thanon Patak; for Thanon Luang Pho Chuain accommodation, alight just after the *Baan Karon* hotel on Thanon Patak. Transport touts throughout the resort rent motorbikes and jeeps; it's 5km from northern Karon to Patong.

Karon's main **shopping** and eating areas are grouped around the *Islandia Hotel* on the northern curve of Thanon Patak, along and around Thanon Luang Pho Chuain, and along Thanon Taina (sometimes referred to as Kata Centre). In all these places you'll find **currency exchange** facilities, with ATMs, **Internet centres**, minimarkets, tour agents, tailors' shops, beachwear outlets, craft shops, restaurants and bars. The local branch of Bookazine, with plenty of books about Thailand, foreign newspapers and magazines and novels, is across from the Thanon Taina junction on the Kata-Karon headland. There's a **clinic** on Thanon Luang Pho Chuain and a **police box** on central Thanon Karon.

Accommodation

Karon **accommodation** is less pricey than Patong, but there's still just one lone ② option in the resort. High season here runs from November to March/April, but

Diving and snorkelling off Phuket

The reefs and islands within sailing distance of Phuket rate among the most spectacular in the world, and this is where you'll find Thailand's largest concentration of **dive shops**, offering some of the best-value certificated courses and trips in the country. All the dive centres listed below offer PADI-certificated diving courses and have qualified instructors and dive-masters; we have highlighted those that are accredited PADI Five-Star Centres (the Instructor Development Centres are one step higher than the Five-Star Centres); see p.57 for details. Nonetheless, you should still try to get first-hand recommendations from other divers before signing up with any dive shop, however highly starred, and always check the equipment and staff credentials carefully.

You should also check that the dive shop has membership for one of Phuket's three **recompression chambers**; if yours doesn't, you could take out your own membership with Badalveda (ⓦwww.badalveda.com; B300), which entitles you to sixty percent discounts on the hourly rate for use of the chamber (down from US$350 to $115/hour), though the best dive shops should ensure that their customers never get into a situation that requires recompression. Phuket's recompression centres are: SSS Network (HST), 233 Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi on Ao Patong (ⓣ076 342518, ⓦwww.sssnetwork.com); Badalveda Diving Medicine Centre at Bangkok Hospital Phuket, 2/1 Thanon Hongyok Utis, in Phuket town (ⓣ076 254425, ⓦwww.badalveda.com); and at Wachira Hospital, Soi Wachira, Thanon Yaowarat, Phuket town (ⓣ076 211114). All dive shops rent **equipment**, and many of them sell essential items too.

A one-day introductory **diving course** averages B2000–3900, and a four-day Openwater course costs between B8000 and B12,500, usually including equipment. The price of **day-trips** to local reefs depends on the distance to the dive site, and the operator, but generally falls between B3000 and B4000, including at least two dives, all equipment and food. Nearly all dive centres also offer **live-aboard** cruises: four-day live-aboard trips to Hin Daeng and Hin Muang (see p.468), and to Ko Similan (see p.386) plus either Ko Surin (see p.371) or the Mergui archipelago in Burmese waters; such trips cost B20,000–30,000, including at least 12 dives and full board but excluding equipment and national park/visa fees.

Snorkellers are usually welcome to join divers' day-trips (for a discount of about B1000) and can sometimes go on live-aboard cruises at slightly reduced rates. In addition, all travel agents sell mass-market day-trips to Ko Phi Phi, which include snorkelling stops at Phi Phi Leh and Phi Phi Don, an hour's snorkelling (mask, fins and snorkel provided) and a seafood lunch. Transport is on large boats belonging to the main local ferry companies, with prices from B1000, or B700 for children. Some companies also offer day-trips to Ko Similan, for about B3000, depending on the speed of the boat; some companies use boats from Phuket, which take three hours, while other companies bus passengers to Thap Lamu and then use speedboats, which also takes around three hours in total. A more exclusive experience is offered by Coralseekers (ⓣ076 354074, ⓦwww.coralseekers.com), who specialize in tailor-made private snorkel speedboat charters to local reefs and islands (from B8000/boat).

Dive shops

All the dive shops listed below offer a variety of itineraries and cruises, with schedules depending on weather conditions and the number of divers; most operate year-round.

AO PATONG

Dive Asia 204 Thanon Raja Uthit Song Roi Phi ⓣ076 292517, ⓦwww.diveasia.com. Five-Star PADI Career Development Centre.

Santana 49 Thanon Thavee Wong ⓣ076 294220, ⓦwww.santanaphuket.com. Five-Star PADI Instructor Development Centre.

Scuba Cat 94 Thanon Thavee Wong ⓣ076 293120, ⓦwww.scubacat.com. Five-Star PADI Instructor Development Centre.

AO KARON/AO KATA

Dive Asia Kata/Karon headland ⓣ076 330598, ⓦwww.diveasia.com. Five-Star PADI Career Development Centre.

Marina Divers Next to *Marina Phuket* Resort at 45 Thanon Karon ⓣ076 330272, ⓦwww.marinadivers.com. Five-Star PADI Instructor Development Centre.

Andaman coast dive and snorkel sites

The major **dive and snorkel sites** visited from Andaman coast resorts are listed below. Here you'll find a stunning variety of coral and a multitude of fish species, including sharks, oysters, puffer fish, stingrays, groupers, lion fish, moray eels and more. For more information on marine life see "Underwater Thailand', pp.18–24, and "The coastal environment" in Contexts, p.529.

Anemone Reef About 22km east of Phuket. Submerged reef of soft coral and sea anemones starting about 5m deep. Lots of fish, including leopard sharks, tuna and barracuda. Usually combined with a dive at nearby Shark Point. Unsuitable for snorkellers.

Burma Banks About 250km northwest of Phuket; only accessible on live-aboards from Khao Lak and Phuket. A series of submerged banks, well away from any land mass and very close to the Burmese border. Visibility up to 25m.

Hin Daeng and **Hin Muang** 26km southwest of Ko Rok Nok, near Ko Lanta (see box on p.468). Hin Daeng is a highly recommended reef wall, with visibility up to 30m. One hundred metres away, Hin Muang also drops to 50m and is a good place for encountering stingrays, manta rays, whale sharks and silvertip sharks. Visibility up to 50m. Because of the depth and the current, both spots are considered too risky for novice divers who have logged fewer than 20 dives. Unsuitable for snorkellers.

King Cruiser Near Shark Point, between Phuket and Ko Phi Phi. Dubbed the **Thai Tanic**, this became a wreck dive in May 1997, when a tourist ferry sank on its way to Ko Phi Phi. Visibility up to 20m, but hopeless for snorkellers because of the depth.

Ko Phi Phi 48km east of Phuket's Ao Chalong. Visibility up to 30m. Spectacular drop-offs; good chance of seeing whale sharks. See p.454.

Ko Racha Noi and **Ko Racha Yai** About 33km and 28km south of Phuket's Ao Chalong respectively. Visibility up to 40m. Racha Yai is good for beginners and for snorkellers; at the more challenging Racha Noi there's a good chance of seeing manta rays, eagle rays and whale sharks. See p.415.

Ko Rok Nok and **Ko Rok Nai** 100km southeast of Phuket, south of Ko Lanta (see box on pp.468–69). Visibility up to 18m. Shallow reefs that are excellent for snorkelling.

Ko Similan 96km northwest of Phuket; easiest access from Khao Lak. One of the world's top ten diving spots. Visibility up to 30m. Leopard sharks, whale sharks and manta rays, plus caves and gorges. See p.385.

Ko Surin 174km northwest of Phuket; easiest access from Khuraburi, or from Ko Chang and Ko Phayam. Shallow reefs particularly good for snorkelling. See p.371.

Richelieu Rock Just east of Ko Surin (see p.371), close to Burmese waters. A sunken pinnacle that's famous for its manta rays and whale sharks.

Shark Point (Hin Mu Sang) 24km east of Phuket's Laem Panwa. Protected as a marine sanctuary. Visibility up to 10m. Notable for soft corals, sea fans and leopard sharks. Often combined with the **King Cruiser** dive and/or Anemone Reef; unrewarding for snorkellers.

you'll almost certainly be charged an extra 25 percent over the Christmas and New Year fortnight when everything gets booked up weeks in advance. During the low season, expect to get discounts of up to fifty percent on the rates given below.

Inexpensive and moderate

Bazoom Hostel Off Thanon Luang Pho Chuain ⓣ076 396914. Korean-oriented backpackers' centre, offering the cheapest beds in this area at B150 per curtained-off bunk bed in a mixed-sex dorm, plus doubles with fan and shared bathroom or en suites with air-con. The cheap prices, boldly painted walls and downstairs Internet café together generate a very traveller-friendly vibe – and it's less than 300m from the sea. Fan and shared bathroom ②, en-suite air-con ④

Casa Brazil 9 Soi 1, Thanon Luang Pho Chuain ⓣ076 396317, ⓦwww.phukethomestay.com. Unusually arty, characterful little hotel, designed in Santa Fe style, with adobe-look walls, earth-toned paintwork, and funky decor and furnishings. The 21 rooms are comfortable and nearly all have air-con. Choose rooms at the back for a rare green and peaceful view of Karon's hilly backdrop, best enjoyed from the French windows and private balconies. Rates include breakfast. ⑥

Happy Inn Soi 1, Thanon Luang Pho Chuain ⓣ076 396260. Decent bungalows in a small garden that occupies a surprisingly peaceful spot. Price depends on the size of the bungalow and whether it has air-con. Fan ③, air-con ⑤

The Little Mermaid 94/25 Thanon Taina, Kata Centre ⓣ076 330730, ⓦwww.littlemermaidphuket.net. Scandinavian-owned place with city-style fan and air-con rooms in a guest-house block, plus bungalow-style rooms, all with air-con and TV, set tightly round a small swimming pool. Advance booking essential. Fan rooms ③, air-con rooms ④, air-con bungalows ⑤–⑦

Lucky Guest House 110/44–45 Thanon Taina, Kata Centre ⓣ076 330572, ⓔluckyguesthouse-kata@hotmail.com. Reasonable-value place offering unusually large, bright en-suite rooms in a low-rise block (the best ones have balconies) and some rather plain semi-detached bungalows on land further back. Choose between fan and air-con. Fan ③, air-con ⑤

Merit Hill Bungalow 28 Soi 2, Thanon Karon ⓣ076 333300, ⓔmhb@bluehorizons.de. Located up a slope across the road from the beach, this is an appealing spot with a range of different accommodation options. The nicest are the apartment-style bungalows, all with air-con, kitchen, living room and a restful view over an adjacent palm grove. Cheapest are the terraced fan rooms with no views. Fan ③, air-con ⑥

Prayoon Bungalows Behind the stadium, off Thanon Karon; access via *Andaman Seaview* ⓣ076 396196. Long-established family-run place with just seven large, comfortable old-style fan bungalows, all with verandas and good bathrooms, widely spaced around a big, sloping garden just 150m or so off the beach. ⑤

Expensive

Golden Sand Inn Northern end of Ao Karon ⓣ076 396493, ⓦwww.phuket-goldensand.com. Popular, medium-sized, mid-priced hotel, one of the least costly of its kind, with good-value, old-style air-con bungalows set around a tropical garden and swimming pool, plus pricier rooms in the central block. Bungalows ⑦, hotel ⑧

Le Meridien On Ao Karon Noi (also known as Relax Bay), north of Ao Karon ⓣ076 340480, ⓦwww.lemeridien.com. This huge hotel complex has the tiny bay all to itself and boasts an amazing breadth of facilities, including nine restaurants, two lake-style swimming pools (with islands), a spa, squash and tennis courts, a climbing wall and private woods. It's a good choice for kids, with reliable babysitting services, a kids' club and lessons in everything from windsurfing and water polo to Thai cookery. ⑨

Marina Phuket Resort 47 Thanon Karon, far southern end of Ao Karon, on the Karon/Kata headland ⓣ076 330625, ⓦwww.marinaphuket.com. The 92 cottages here are dotted around an effusive and secluded tropical garden that leads right down to the beach. All the bungalows have air-con and some kind of outdoor space from which to enjoy the garden; the top-end options have ocean views. The resort is known for its charming service and has good facilities, including a pool and the prettily located restaurant, *On the Rock*, plus it's convenient for Karon's other bars and restaurants. ⑨

The Old Phuket Soi Aroona Karon, 192/36 Thanon Karon ⓣ076 396353, ⓦwww.theoldphuket.com. Designed to evoke early-twentieth-century Sino-Portuguese shophouse architecture from Malacca (and Phuket town), rooms here manage to be both pretty and modern. Coloured glass window panels and East Indies-style wooden doors are complemented by contemporary furnishings and air-conditioning, with the "terrace rooms" enjoying garden shower rooms plus their own little streetside garden out front. The hotel has a rooftop pool, a sauna and a kids' area. It's located 100m from the beach down a soi oriented towards Scandinavian tourists. ⑨

Eating and drinking

Karon's choice of **restaurants** is underwhelming, lacking either the big-name restaurants of Patong or the authentic eateries of Phuket town. Places worth trying out are listed below, in addition to which is the string of seven open-fronted streetside restaurants just north of the stadium on Thanon Karon, whose inexpensive offerings range from king prawns to burgers, and *matsaman* curries to spaghetti.

Most of the Thanon Taina **bars** are small, genial places: *Café del Mar* is an inviting, hip little joint serving margaritas and daiquiris as well as other drinks, while *Blue Fin* has happy hours 3–7pm daily and *Anchor Bar* serves Blackthorn cider. Though there are as yet no go-go bars on Karon, the Patong bar scene has made significant inroads, and there are clusters of bar-beers with hostess service in the Karon Centre and on sois off Thanon Luang Pho Chuain, and around the *Islandia Hotel* on Thanon Patak.

Kampong-Kata Hill Restaurant Access via a steep ramp off Thanon Karon. Quality Thai and seafood dishes and fancy Thai-style decor set this place apart and ensure it always gets a good crowd. Its curries – red, green, dry and country-style – are especially good and come in all permutations (B120–180). Also serves reasonably priced imported wine by the glass. Nightly 5pm–midnight.

Kwong Seafood Shop Thanon Taina. Very popular for its array of freshly caught fish and seafood which can be barbecued or cooked to order; most dishes B120. Daily 11am–11pm.

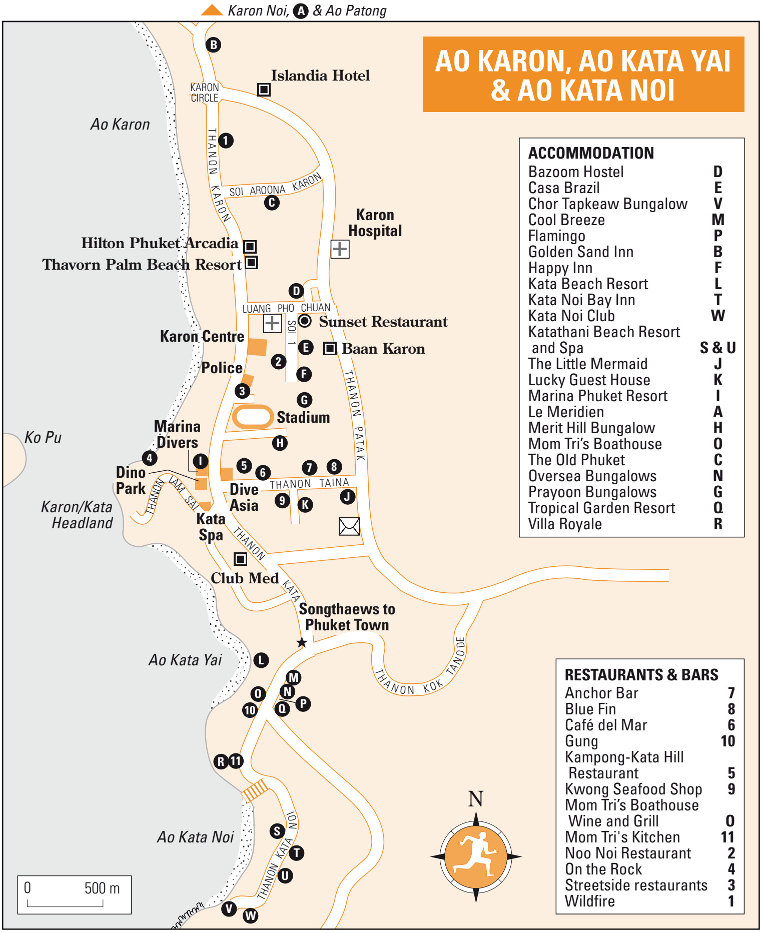
On the Rock In the grounds of *Marina Phuket Resort*, Kata/Karon headland. Occupying a fine spot above the rocks at the southern end of Ao Karon, this open-air restaurant serves especially good mixed baskets of grilled and deep-fried seafood. Main dishes cost B150–600. Daily 8am–11pm.

Noo Noi Restaurant Soi 1, Thanon Luang Pho Chuain. Small, simple, family-run café, in front of the family home, that deserves a mention for determinedly continuing to dish out Thai standards (mainly fried rice and noodle dishes, from B35) at exceptionally cheap prices, despite the inflated rates charged by most other similar places. Daily 8am–10pm.

Wildfire Thanon Karon. This strikingly designed four-in-one dining experience includes an outdoor, sea-view deck-bar, the *Sandbar*, and a restaurant on the top floor, serving Thai "tapas" at B50 a dish, good wood-fired pizzas, and all-you can eat barbecue specials (B750). Daily 11am–11pm.

Ao Kata Yai and Ao Kata Noi

Broad, curving **AO KATA YAI** (Big Kata Bay) is only a few minutes' drive around the headland from Karon (17km from Phuket town), but both prettier and safer for swimming, thanks to the protective rocky promontories at either end. It's also a good distance from the road. The northern stretch of Kata Yai is given over to the unobtrusive buildings of the *Club Med* resort, and the southern to *Kata Beach Resort*; in between the soft sand is busy with sunloungers and the occasional drink and fruit stall. The rest of the accommodation and the bulk of the tourist village, is at the southern end, where you'll also find the restaurants, bars, minimarkets, tour operators and transport rental outlets. A headland at the southernmost point divides Ao Kata Yai from the smaller **AO KATA NOI** (Little Kata Bay), whose gold-sand bay feels secluded, being at the end of a dead-end road, but is very popular and so gets quite crowded with loungers. Kata Noi has its own low-key but rather charmless cluster of businesses, including a minimarket, several restaurants, transport rental and a tailor's shop, though it's dominated by the enormous two-site complex of the *Katathani* hotel.


Karon Noi, A & Ao Patong
AO KARON, AO KATA YAI & AO KATA NOI
ACCOMMODATION
Bazoom Hostel D
Casa Brazil E
Chor Tapkeaw Bungalow V
Cool Breeze M
Flamingo P
Golden Sand Inn B
Happy Inn F
Kata Beach Resort L
Kata Noi Bay Inn T
Kata Noi Club W
Katathani Beach Resort and Spa S & U
The Little Mermaid J
Lucky Guest House K
Marina Phuket Resort I
Le Meridien A
Merit Hill Bungalow H
Mom Tri's Boathouse O
The Old Phuket C
Oversea Bungalows N
Prayoon Bungalows G
Tropical Garden Resort Q
Villa Royale R
RESTAURANTS & BARS
Anchor Bar 7
Blue Fin 8
Café del Mar 6
Gung 10
Kampong-Kata Hill Restaurant 5
Kwong Seafood Shop 9
Mom Tri's Boathouse Wine and Grill O
Mom Tri's Kitchen 11
Noo Noi Restaurant 2
On the Rock 4
Streetside restaurants 3
Wildfire 1
Islandia Hotel
KARON CIRCLE
Ao Karon
THANON KARON
SOI AROONA KARON
Karon Hospital
Hilton Phuket Arcadia
Thavorn Palm Beach Resort
LUANG PHO CHUAN
SOI 1
Sunset Restaurant
Baan Karon
Karon Centre
Police
Stadium
THANON PATAK
Ko Pu
Marina Divers
Dino Park
THANON LAM SAI
Dive Asia
THANON TAINA
Karon/Kata Headland
Kata Spa
THANON KATA
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THANON KOK TANODE
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Most **songthaews** from Phuket go first to Karon (B25), then drive south past *Club Med* and terminate at *Kata Beach Resort* on the headland between Kata Yai and Kata Noi (B30); returning songthaews depart approx every 20min, 5.30am–4.30pm. To get to Kata Noi, continue walking over the hill for about ten minutes, or take a tuk-tuk for about B100. A tuk-tuk from Kata Yai to Karon will cost you about B150.

Accommodation and eating

There is no really cheap **accommodation** on Kata Noi or Kata Yai. Most of the hotels along Kata Yai's Thanon Kok Tanode (also spelt Kok Tanot) are built up the hillside, which means guests face a steep climb to get to their rooms, but are then rewarded with expansive bay views.

The best and most famous **restaurant** here is *Mom Tri's Boathouse Wine and Grill* on Kata Yai, which has a famously extensive wine list and an exquisite and extremely expensive menu (B300–900) of Thai and Western delicacies; it runs Thai cooking classes every weekend (see p.393). Mom Tri also has two other highly rated restaurants in the Kata area: the less formal but still fairly pricey *Gung*, almost next door to the *Boathouse*, with beachfront seating and a menu that includes a range of Thai dishes as well as seafood and rock lobster (*gung*); and the exclusive *Mom Tri's Kitchen*, part of the *Villa Royale* hotel complex, which overlooks Kata Noi from the rocks at its northern point.

Kata Yai

Cool Breeze 225 Thanon Kok Tanode ⓣ076 330484, ⓦwww.phuketindex.com/coolbreezebungalows. The sixteen good-sized fan and air-con bungalows here are set at different levels within the hillside garden, above the streetside restaurant, and the best of them have partial sea views from their terraces. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑥

Flamingo Thanon Kok Tanode ⓣ076 330776. Dozens of prettily positioned air-con bungalows built among the trees on a steep incline above the flamingo-coloured restaurant and bar. Most have verandas and some have sea views. Also has a tiny swimming pool and a small spa. ⑥–⑦

Kata Beach Resort Thanon Kata ⓣ076 330530, ⓦwww.katagroup.com. This huge, high-rise hotel occupies a great spot right on the edge of the white-sand beach. It has a big, shorefront swimming pool, a kids' pool and lots of watersports facilities, so it's popular with families; also runs Thai cooking and fruit-carving classes. ⑨

Mom Tri's Boathouse Thanon Kok Tanode ⓣ076 330015, ⓦwww.boathousephuket.com. Exclusive and very pricey beachfront boutique hotel with just 36 elegantly furnished sea-view rooms, a reputation for classy service, and a famously top-notch restaurant. Also has some even more luxurious suites and studios at *Villa Royale*, a "gourmet hotel" set in landscaped tropical gardens above Kata Noi. Advance booking essential. Published rates from B8200. ⑨

Oversea Bungalows Thanon Kok Tanode ⓣ076 284155, ⓦwww.twochefs-phuket.com. Nine huge bungalows ranged up the hillside and accessed by a series of steep stairways. Many offer fine sea views from their wraparound balconies and all have air-con. Closed May–Oct. ⑦

Tropical Garden Resort 247 Thanon Kok Tanode ⓣ076 285211, ⓦwww.tropicalphuketresort.com. Good value mid-range hotel just one minute's walk from the beach, with comfortable air-con rooms in half a dozen buildings stacked up the hillside and some excellent bay-view panoramas from the balconies of pricier options. Has two pools and a kids area. Popular with package tourists. ⑧

Kata Noi

Chor Tapkaew Bungalow 18 Thanon Kata Noi ⓣ076 330433, ⓦwww.phuketdir.com/ctapkaew. The spacious and fairly comfortably furnished fan and air-con bungalows here are ranged up the hillside at the far southern end of the road; the verandas give good sea views and the restaurant is right on the beach. Book ahead as there are only 24 rooms and it's popular. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑦

Kata Noi Bay Inn Thanon Kata Noi ⓣ076 333308, ⓦwww.phuket.com/katanoibayinn. Small, friendly little hotel attached to a seafood restaurant, offering the cheapest accommodation on this beach. Most of the 28 fan and air-con rooms have balconies and, in some cases, a distant sea view. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑥–⑦

Kata Noi Club Thanon Kata Noi ⓣ076 284025, ⓔkatanoi_club@yahoo.com. Set in among lots of trees at the far southern end of the beachfront road, this small, 25-room operation has some rather spartan bungalows as well as a few better, pricier air-con ones. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑦

Katathani Beach Resort and Spa 14 Thanon Kata Noi ⓣ076 330124, ⓦwww.katathani.com. Occupying about half the beachfront, and a big chunk of land across the narrow road, this is the biggest and poshest outfit on Kata Noi. The shorefront all-suite *Katathani* wing is pricier and all its rooms have sea-view balconies, though rooms at the inland, garden-view *Bhuri* wing are also very deluxe. The hotel has five swimming pools and a spa, plus tennis courts, a games room, a dive shop and a kids' playground. Published rates from US$200. ⑨

Hat Nai Harn, Hat Ya Nui and Laem Promthep

Around the next headland south from Kata Noi, **HAT NAI HARN**, 18km southwest of Phuket town, is a beautiful curved bay of white sand backed by a stand of casuarinas and plenty of foodstalls but only minimal development. It's a popular spot for day-trippers, so the beach soon gets crowded with parasols and loungers, but you can escape the throng by hiring a kayak (B100–150/hr or B500–700/day) and paddling off to the Laem Promthep headland or to the nearby island of Ko Kaeo Pisadan (see opposite). Be warned though that during the monsoon the waves here are huge. The beach is dominated by the luxurious **hotel**, *Le Royal Meridien Phuket Yacht Club* (ⓣ076 380200, ⓦphuketyachtclub.lemeridien.com; ⑨), whose attractive rooms are raked up the hill and all have capacious balconies to make the most of the fine sea views. There's slightly cheaper accommodation next door at the well-sited though architecturally unappealing *Sabana Resort* (ⓣ076 289327, ⓦwww.sabana-resort.com; ⑧–⑨), which offers plain concrete row rooms and a decent sized pool and is just over the narrow road from the shore.

Follow the coastal road 2km south around the lumpy headland and you reach the tiny roadside beach of **HAT YA NUI**, which gets a surprising number of visitors despite being so small and right next to the admittedly quiet road. There are coral reefs very close to the shore, though the currents are strong, and kayaks and sun-loungers for rent. Just across the road from the beach the family-run *Ya Nui Beach Bungalows* offers simple bamboo **huts** with fan and bath in a pretty garden (ⓣ076 288278, ⓦwww.yanuibungalow.com; ④), while 200m uphill from the beach there are larger, better and more stylish en-suite fan-cooled bamboo bungalows, also in an attractively shaded garden with higher-level sea views, at *Nai Ya Beach Bungalow* (ⓣ076 288817, closed May–Oct; ⑤–⑥).

A further 1km on, you reach the southernmost tip of Phuket at the sheer headland of **Laem Promthep**. Wild and rugged, jutting out into the deep blue of the Andaman Sea, the cape is one of the island's top beauty spots: at sunset, busloads of tour groups get shipped in to admire the scenery – and just to ensure you don't miss the spectacle, a list of year-round sunset times is posted both at the viewpoint and in the middle of Phuket town. Several reefs lie just off the cape, and anglers often try their luck from the boulders around the shoreline.

Songthaews from Phuket town (every 30min; 45min; B30) go to Nai Harn, via Rawai, but for Hat Ya Nui and Laem Promthep you have to do the lengthy climb round the promontory on foot. Taxis from this area to Patong cost B500.

The southeast coast and its islands

Shadowed by the mainland, Phuket's **southeast coast** lacks the fine sandy beaches and resorts of the west coast, and is chiefly the province of harbours for boats to other islands, though Phuketians come for the numerous seafood restaurants along the shore. Some of these smaller satellite islands, in particular **Ko Kaeo Pisadan** and **Ko Racha Yai**, offer a beach experience now lost on "mainland" Phuket, of turquoise waters and near-empty shores.

Hat Rawai

Phuket's southernmost beach, **HAT RAWAI**, was the first to be exploited for tourist purposes, but, forty years on, the hoteliers have moved to the softer sands of Kata and Karon, leaving Rawai to its former inhabitants, the Urak Lawoy *chao ley* ("sea gypsies", for more on whom, see pp.370–71), and to an expanding expat population. Most visitors are here for the seafood – served both at the many open-air restaurants on the beachfront, and Thai-style on mats under the shorefront casuarinas – or for the expat-run bars, while others barely linger as they hire a longtail or speedboat out to the islands offshore. Aside from the food, the chief local attraction is the **Phuket Seashell Museum** (daily 8am–6pm; B100), on the main road inland from the beach, which displays some two thousand species of shell, including 380-million-year-old fossils, giant clams, and a 140-carat gold pearl. **Songthaews** from Phuket town's Thanon Ranong market pass through Rawai (B25, 35min) on their way to and from Nai Harn.

Ko Kaeo Pisadan

The tiny islet of **KO KAEO PISADAN** (also known as Ko Kaeo Yai and sometimes spelt Ko Kaew Phitsadan) makes an idyllic escape from the big resorts and works either as a day-trip or as an ultra-peaceful overnight getaway. It lies just 1km off Laem Promthep cape and takes only 15–20 minutes to reach by longtail from either Hat Rawai or Hat Nai Harn (B800 return for the whole boat), or about half an hour by kayak from Nai Harn.

The island is known locally for its Buddhist monastery, Wat Ko Kaeo Pisadan, which receives a steady stream of devotees keen to pay their respects and to chat with the coterie of resident monks, the island's only permanent inhabitants. Ko Kaeo is so small it takes mere minutes to cross on foot, or two hours to circumnavigate in a kayak (available for rent on the island). Its principal beach is only 200-metres long but graced with dazzling white sand and turquoise water and with enough reefs to be worth putting on a mask and snorkel. You can make the most of this exclusive spot by staying at *Ko Kaeo Pisadan* (Ⓣ084 745 5907, Ⓦwww.kokaeopisadan.com; ⑥), whose three large, nicely designed timber **bungalows** are sited in a breathtakingly beautiful location above the water and have French windows opening onto huge sea-view decks; it's a strictly no-smoking resort. Alternatively you could a rent a tent for B300 and pitch it among the palms and flowering shrubs in the shorefront garden. The restaurant, *Bistro Havana*, also enjoys fine vistas; it makes an effort to use wholesome ingredients and serves seafood and some veggie dishes (from B100).

Ko Hai

Despite the name, the reefs around **KO HAI** (aka Ko Hey or **Coral Island**), 9km southeast off Hat Rawai, are not as rewarding as those at Ko Racha, and the waters get very crowded with visiting tour boats. But the island is blessed with several beautiful white-sand beaches that are good for swimming year-round. Organized day-trips to the island are sold by all travel agents and cost B600. You can also stay on the island, at *Coral Island Resort* (Ⓣ076 281060, Ⓦwww.phuket.com/coralisland; ⑦–⑧), which has 64 bungalows and a pool and dive centre set in lush tropical gardens.

Ko Racha Yai

Tiny **KO RACHA YAI**, measuring approximately three kilometres long by three kilometres wide, boasts a couple of awesome white-sand beaches with crystal-clear turquoise water, several reefs with prolific and varied fish life, and a range of places to stay. The beaches are small however so if you're here independently you'll likely share each one of them with day-trippers for an hour or two, though the best looking, Ao Siam, is big enough to cope. Exploring the interior is also fun – tracks crisscross through palm groves and a couple of hamlets, with plenty of wilderness still in evidence and occasional stands of cashew and jackfruit, mango and tamarind tree, even a few water buffaloes and some resident metre-long iguanas. There's Internet access at *The Racha* and *Ban Raya*, plus on Ao Batok, where there's also a minimarket and several small bars and restaurants. Both these hotels also have dive shops, open to all for trips and courses. Ko Racha Yai is 23 km south of Phuket and **access** is via longtail from Hat Rawai (1hr 30min; about B2500 to charter for the day) or by speedboat from Ao Chalong (about 30min). From November to April several speedboats, including those run by *Bungalow Raya Resort* and by *Ban Raya* (see overleaf), leave Ao Chalong every morning at about

9am and return from the island at 3pm (B500–600 one way or B1200 day-trip, including transfers, lunch and snorkelling equipment plus usually three stops in different spots around the island). *The Racha* has its own guest boat.

The main docking point, and the focus for day-trippers, is tiny, deep-cut **Ao Batok** (Patok), whose 400-metre-long shorefront is dominated by the elegant white-cube and slate-roof buildings of the ultra-luxurious **hotel**, *The Racha* (Ⓣ076 355455, Ⓦwww.theracha.com; rates from US$200; ⑨). Guests here can choose between sleekly designed superior and deluxe villas, some with their own plunge pool and direct sea view. There's a gorgeous infinity pool, three restaurants and a spa plus free cycle, kayak and snorkel rental for guests. The much more affordable en-suite fan-cooled bamboo bungalows at *Bungalow Raya Resort* (Ⓣ076 288271, Ⓦwww.bgracharesort.com, Ⓔrayaresort@phuketinternet.co.th; ⑤) share the bay, sitting atop the northern headland, with a couple offering unbeatable views over the sparkling sea; there's a nicely sited, if pricey, restaurant here too, with a similar view.

The next beach around the headland, two minutes' walk over the hill from beside *Bungalow Raya Resort*, is north-facing **Ao Siam**, the longest and prettiest on the island and still largely backed by coconut palms. A couple of **places to stay** sit atop its western cliff, both offering en-suite bamboo bungalows, with fan, mosquito net and some sort of view: *Raya Seaview Bungalow* (Ⓣ081 397 5141; closed May–Oct; ⑤) has the better accommodation, while *Jungle View* (Ⓣ081 396 0887; closed May–Oct; ⑤) has a gloriously sited high-level restaurant deck with panoramas that take in the whole bay. The *Jungle Bar* at the eastern end of the bay does barbecues and occasional live music and there are a couple of small food and drink stalls too.

About 15 minutes' walk due east of Ao Batok, **Ao Ter** is a scruffy little bay, full of flotsam (though this may change if signs of construction work come to fruition), but its chief attraction is its good snorkelling both on the shoreline, where the reef is uninteresting but the fish quite spectacular in range and number, and about 100m offshore, where there are two dive sites, including a small wreck. Further down the east coast, there's even less of a beach at **Ao Kon Kare**, though you can swim here, and its reefs are rewarding for snorkelling and diving. It's also the site of *Ban Raya* (Ⓣ076 355563, Ⓦwww.banraya.com; fan ⑦, air-con ⑦), a mid-market place of fan and air-con wooden chalets set in carefully landscaped flower gardens beneath palm trees; the resort has bicycles for rent, and a spa and library and is about 15 minutes' walk from Ao Batok or Ao Siam.

Ao Chalong, Laem Panwa and Ko Siray

East of Rawai, the sizeable offshore island of Ko Lone protects the broad sweep of **AO CHALONG**, where many a Chinese fortune was made from the huge quantities of tin mined in the bay. These days, Ao Chalong is the main departure point for dive excursions and fishing trips, and for speedboats to other islands, including Ko Racha Yai and Ko Hai. For islanders however, Chalong is important as the site of **Wat Chalong** (8km southwest of Phuket town, on Thanon Chao Fa Nok, aka Route 4022; the Phuket–Karon songthaew passes the entrance), Phuket's loveliest and most famous temple, which enshrines the statue of revered monk Luang Pho Cham, who helped quash a violent rebellion by migrant Chinese tin-miners in 1876. Elsewhere in the temple compound, the Phra Mahathat chedi is believed to contain a relic of the Buddha. Though there's no special reason to **stay** in this part of the island, you might make an exception for the sister branch of Bangkok's famously laid-back backpacker haven, *Shanti Lodge* (Ⓣ076 280233, Ⓦwww.shantilodge.com/phuket; ③–⑤), just a few hundred metres south down Thanon Chao Fa Nok on Soi Bangrae (the Phuket-Karon songthaew should drop you close by). It's set in a relaxing garden, with herbal sauna, and has B150 dorms as well as fan and air-con doubles with or without private bathroom.

Ao Chalong tapers off eastwards into **LAEM PANWA**, at the tip of which you'll find the **Phuket Aquarium** (daily 8.30am–4pm; B100, kids B50), 10km south of Phuket town and accessible by frequent songthaews from the market. Run by the island's Marine Research Centre, it's not a bad primer for what you might see on a reef and has walk-through tunnels and a touch pool where you can interact with sea cucumbers and sea stars.

Around the other side of Laem Panwa, the island's deep-sea port of **Ao Makham** is dominated by a smelting and refining plant, bordered to the north by **Ao Phuket** and **KO SIRAY** (aka Ko Sire), which just about qualifies as an island because of the narrow channel that separates it from Phuket. Tour buses stop off at Ko Siray (5km due east of Phuket town) to spy on Phuket's largest and longest-established *chao ley* community; for more on the *chao ley* see pp.370–71. The Ko Siray channel is the departure point for many scheduled **ferries to Ko Phi Phi**, most of which use **Rassada Harbour**; transfers to and from the port are fixed price and sometimes included in the price of the boat ticket.

Songthaews to Ao Chalong (B20) and the aquarium (B25) leave approximately every thirty minutes from Thanon Ranong in Phuket town.

The interior

If you have your own transport, exploring the lush, verdant **interior** makes a good antidote to lying on scorched beaches. All the tiny back roads – some too small to figure on tourist maps – eventually link up with the arteries connecting Phuket town with the beaches, and the minor routes south of Hat Nai Yang are especially picturesque, passing through monsoon forest that once in a while opens out into spiky pineapple fields or regimentally ordered **rubber plantations**. Thailand's first rubber trees were planted in Trang in 1901, and Phuket's sandy soil proved to be especially well suited to the crop. All over the island you'll see cream-coloured sheets of latex hanging out to dry on bamboo racks in front of villagers' houses.

Thalang and around

North of Ao Karon, Phuket's minor roads eventually swing back to the central Highway 402, also known as Thanon Thepkasatri after the landmark monument that stands on a roundabout 12km north of Phuket town. This **Heroines' Monument** commemorates the repulse of the Burmese army by the widow of the governor of Phuket and her sister in 1785: the two women rallied the island's womenfolk who, legend has it, cut their hair short and rolled up banana leaves to look like musket barrels to frighten the Burmese away. All songthaews to Hat Surin and Hat Nai Yang pass the monument (as does all mainland-bound traffic), and this is where you should alight for the **Thalang Museum** (Ⓦ www.thailandmuseum.com; daily 9am–4pm; B30), five minutes' walk east of here on Route 4027. Phuket's only museum, it has a few interesting exhibits on the local tin and rubber industries, as well as some colourful folkloric history and photos of the masochistic feats of the Vegetarian Festival (see box on p.395). If you continue along Route 4027 you'll eventually reach the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project, described overleaf.

Eight kilometres north of the Heroines' Monument, just beyond the crossroads in the small town of **THALANG**, stands **Wat Phra Thong**, one of Phuket's most revered temples on account of the power of the Buddha statue it enshrines. The solid gold image is half-buried and no one dares dig it up for fear of a curse that has struck down excavators in the past. After the wat was built around the statue, the image was encased in plaster to deter would-be robbers.

Phra Taew National Park

The road east of the Thalang intersection takes you to the visitor centre of **PHRA TAEW NATIONAL PARK**, 3km away. Several paths cross this small hilly enclave, leading you through the forest habitat of macaques and wild boar, but the most popular features of the park are the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project and the Ton Sai and Bang Pae waterfalls, which combine well as a day-trip. The Gibbon Project is located about 10km northeast of the Heroines' Monument, off Route 4027. **Songthaews** from Phuket town, more frequent in the morning, will take you most of the way: ask to be dropped off at Bang Pae (a 40min drive from town) and then follow the signed track for about 1km to get to the project centre. You can get drinks and snacks at the foodstall next to the Rehabilitation Centre, and the route to the waterfalls is signed from here. The **Bang Rong pier** for boats to Ko Yao Noi is a few kilometres northeast of the national park; see p.420 for details.

The Gibbon Rehabilitation Project

Phuket's forests used once to resound with the whooping calls of indigenous white-handed lar gibbons, but because these primates make such charismatic pets there is now not a single wild gibbon at large on the island. The situation has become so dire that the lar is now an endangered species, and in 1992 it became illegal in Thailand to keep them as pets, to sell them or to kill them. Despite this, you'll come across a good number of pet gibbons on Phuket, kept in chains by bar and hotel owners as entertainment for their customers or as pavement photo opportunities for foolish tourists. The **Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre** (daily 9am–4pm, last tour at 3.15pm; B200, kids 100; Ⓦ www.gibbonproject.org) aims to reverse this state of affairs, first by rescuing as many pet gibbons as they can, and then by resocializing and re-educating them for the wild before finally releasing them back into the forests. It is apparently not unusual for gibbons to be severely traumatized by their experience as pets: not only will they have been taken forcibly from their mothers, but they may also have been abused by their owners.

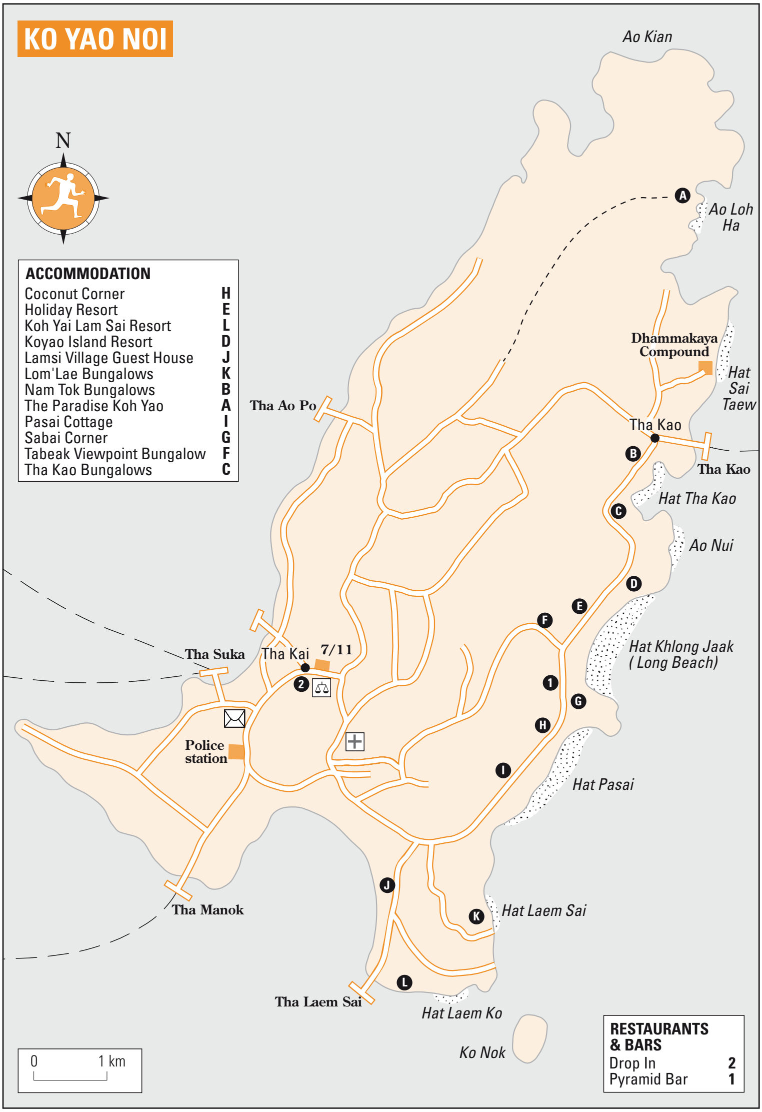
Visitors are welcome at the project, which is centred in the forests of Phra Taew National Park, close to Bang Pae waterfall, but because the whole point of the rehab project is to minimize the gibbons' contact with humans, you can only admire the creatures from afar. There's a small exhibition here on the aims of the project, and the well-informed volunteer guides will fill you in on the details of each case and on the idiosyncratic habits of the lar gibbon (see "The coastal environment" in Contexts, p.531, for more about Thailand's primates). Should you want to become a project volunteer yourself, or make a donation, you can email the project centre.

Bang Pae and Ton Sai waterfalls

If you follow the track along the river from the Gibbon Project, you'll soon arrive at **Bang Pae Falls**, a popular picnic and bathing spot, ten to fifteen minutes' walk away. Continue on the track for another 2.8km (about 1hr 30min on foot) and you should reach **Ton Sai Falls**: though not a difficult climb, it is quite steep in places and can be rough underfoot. There are plenty of opportunities for cool dips in the river en route. Once at Ton Sai you can either walk back down to the Phra Taew National Park access road and try to hitch a ride back home, or return the way you came.

Ko Yao Noi

Located in an idyllic spot on the edge of Phang Nga bay, almost equidistant from Phuket, Phang Nga and Krabi, the island of **KO YAO NOI** enjoys magnificent


KO YAO NOI
N
ACCOMMODATION
Coconut Corner H
Holiday Resort E
Koh Yai Lam Sai Resort L
Koyao Island Resort D
Lamsi Village Guest House J
Lom'Lae Bungalows K
Nam Tok Bungalows B
The Paradise Koh Yao A
Pasai Cottage I
Sabai Corner G
Tabeak Viewpoint Bungalow F
Tha Kao Bungalows C
Ao Kian
Ao Loh Ha
Dhammakaya Compound
Hat Sai Taew
Tha Kao
Krabi
Hat Tha Kao
Ao Nui
Tha Ao Po
Phang Nga
Phuket
Phuket & Phang Nga
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maritime views from almost every angle and makes a refreshingly tranquil getaway. Measuring about 12km at its longest point, it's home to some 3200 islanders, the vast majority of them Muslim, who earn their living from rubber and coconut plantations, fishing and shrimp-farming. Tourism here is low-key, not least because the beaches lack the wow factor of more sparkling nearby sands, and visitors are drawn instead by the rural ambience and lack of commercial pressures.

Nonetheless, there's decent swimming off the east coast at high tide, and at low tide too in a few places, and plenty of potential kayaking destinations. Exploring the interior is a particular pleasure, either via the barely trafficked round-island road as it runs through tiny villages and past the occasional ricefield, or via the trails that crisscross the forested interior, where you've a good chance of encountering monkeys as well as cobras and even pythons, not to mention plenty of birds, including majestic oriental pied hornbills.

Island practicalities

There are three mainland departure points for **boats** to Ko Yao Noi: from Phuket, Krabi's Ao Thalen, and Phang Nga. The most common route is from Bang Rong on **Phuket's** northeast coast (1hr; B80). Boats depart Bang Rong at 9.30am, 11am, 12.30pm, 2.30pm and 5pm, and return from Ko Yao Noi at 7.30am, 10am, 1.30pm and 3.30pm; a songthaew service from Phuket town's Thanon Ranong market runs to Bang Rong approximately hourly 9am–1pm (90min; B25). The Phuket boats use either of two piers on Ko Yao Noi's southwest coast, Tha Manok or Tha Suka, depending on the tide; taxi drivers always know which to head for and charge B50–70 per person for transfers to accommodation. The **Krabi** option entails taking a boat from Ao Thalen, about 30km northwest of Krabi. Boats depart Ao Thalen at 11am and 1pm (1hr; B80) and songthaews from Krabi town connect with them (depart from near the Vogue Department Store at 10am and noon). Boats return from Ko Yao Noi at 7.30am. The Krabi boats use the Tha Kao pier on Ko Yao Noi's northeast coast. Boats also run to Ko Yao Noi from **Phang Nga** bay pier at Tha Dan, 9km south of Phang Nga town, departing at 1pm, returning from Ko Yao Noi at 7.30am (90min; B120); songthaews connect Phang Nga town with the pier. On Ko Yao Noi, the Phang Nga boats use the same pier as the Phuket boats, depending on the tide (see above). The Ko Yao Noi–Phang Nga ride is especially scenic as it takes you through the heart of Ao Phang Nga, passing close by the stilt-house island of Ko Panyi (see p.425).

A paved 17-kilometre-long ring road runs around the southern two-thirds of the island, and to explore it you need either to ask your accommodation to phone for a **taxi**, or to rent your own transport. Most hotels can arrange **motorbike** hire (B200–250/day) and **bicycles** can be rented from *Coconut Corner*, *Lom'Lae* and *Holiday Resort* for B150/day: a circuit of the ring road takes a couple of hours by bicycle, with just one significant hill west of Tha Khao, though there are many enticing side branches too. **Kayaking** around the coast is also possible, and the dozens of tiny islands visible from the east coast make enticing destinations for experienced paddlers; kayaks can be rented through Ko Yao Noi hotels for about B150/hour, or you can join an overnight kayaking trip here from Phuket or Krabi.

Nearly all island hotels can arrange **excursions**. *Sabai Corner* offers longtail charters to Ko Hong and other islands in the bay for B2000–3000 (maximum seven people, excluding lunch, with kayaks an optional extra) and *Lom'Lae* does all-inclusive snorkelling trips for B1600 per person (kids B800) as well as guided self-paddle kayak outings for B2600/1300 per person. They also run rock climbing courses B1800/half-day and cooking classes (B1600/800 and have the only **dive** shop on the island, Ko Yao Dive and Marine Sports (Ⓦwww.kohyaodive.com), which leads dive trips to sites around Phuket and Phi Phi for B2500–3500, and teaches Openwater courses for B12,000.

Around the island

Most tourists stay on the **east coast**, which has the main beaches and the bulk of the accommodation. But the rest of the island is well worth a day's outing by motorbike or bicycle, which also gives you the chance for a roti and even an email check in the island's tiny town, **Tha Khai**.

Hat Tha Khao, Hat Sai Taew

The most northerly of the main eastern beaches is **HAT THA KAO**, site of a small village, with a couple of shops and a restaurant, the pier for boats to and from Krabi, and a few tourist bungalows. It's also the closest point to Ko Yao's nicest beach, so-called **Temple Beach** or **HAT SAI TAEW**, 2km away, whose

△ Making fish traps, Ko Yao Noi.

pretty, gold-sand shore is great for swimming at any tide. It's accessed via land that belongs to the Dhammakaya Foundation, a popular Buddhist sect, and is unsigned and so a bit tricky to find. From Tha Khao pier, head inland and take the first right, then go right again, via the khlong and its sheltered marina, and through rubber plantations; you will need to go through the gated Dhammakaya compound to reach the beach – there's no temple, just a group of *kuti* (meditation cells) around a pond and some other meditators' accommodation.

A five-minute walk south from the Tha Kao ferry pier brings you to the ultra-laid-back *Nam Tok Bungalows* (Ⓣ087 292 1102; ③), one of the cheapest **places to stay** on the island. Its eight bungalows are set back from Hat Tha Khao beach, beside a khlong, in a small garden full of flowers and a fishpond; they're simple but comfortable and all have cute garden bathrooms. The owner, an island fisherman, lets you cook your own meals in his kitchen and takes his guests on camping trips to Ko Pak Bia (B3000 per boat); he also rents motorbikes. At the southern end of Hat Tha Kao, *Tha Kao Bungalows* (Ⓣ076 596564; ④) has five rudimentary beachfront huts with fans and nets.

Hat Klong Jaak (Long Beach)

South of Hat Tha Kao, **HAT KLONG JAAK**, more commonly referred to as **LONG BEACH**, is the site of the longest-running and best-known tourist accommodation. It's also where you'll find the genial, Scottish-Thai-run *Pyramid Bar* (daily 5pm–1am), which plays chilled music, serves **cocktails** and beer, and is a good spot to meet islanders and expats; it's about 200m north of *Sabai Corner* at the southern end of the beach. To date there are no shops or other amenities on Long Beach.

The most stylish and exclusive of the Long Beach **bungalows** is *Koyao Island Resort* (Ⓣ076 597474, Ⓦwww.koyao.com; ⑨; high-season rates from B8000), which also happens to occupy the nicest stretch of the beach, the only bit that's reliable for swimming at any tide. The resort comprises just fifteen chic Bali-style fan-cooled cottage compounds, all of them with separate living areas, huge bathrooms, and sliding doors that give access to the spacious garden and its fine bay views. There's Internet access here and a spa, and the restaurant serves expensive European food. Heading south, you can't miss the blue roofs of *Holiday Resort* (Ⓣ081 607 7912, Ⓦwww.holidayresort.co.th; ⑧, but frequently discounted and one night in seven is thrown in for free), a mid-market place that's one of only a handful on the island to offer both fan and air-con. Though they look uninspiring from the outside, the bungalow and room interiors are attractive and comfortable and the bay views from the roadside garden and many verandas are superlative. The resort rents motorbikes, bicycles and kayaks. Two hundred metres inland, on a cross-island track, the Japanese-Thai-run *Tabeak Viewpoint Bungalows* (Ⓣ089 590 4182, Ⓦwww.kohyaobungalowgroup.com; ④–⑤) has just four large, well-outfitted fan-cooled wood-and-bamboo bungalows all offering commanding views of the islands; the Thai owner is a community policeman and an excellent source of island info. Long Beach's far southern headland, about 3.5km south of the Tha Kao pier, is occupied by the long-established *Sabai Corner* (Ⓣ076 597497, Ⓔsabaicorner@yahoo.com; ④–⑤), a laid-back little outfit of ten thoughtfully designed wooden bungalows, all with fans, nets and bathrooms, plus decks and hammocks, set on a rise between the road and the beach, under cashew and jackfruit trees.

Hat Pasai and Laem Sai

South around the headland from Long Beach is **HAT PASAI,** at the top end of which, just one minute's walk from Long Beach's *Sabai Corner*, sits the traveller-friendly *Coconut Corner*, (ⓣ076 597134, ⓔthaimrbean@hotmail.com; ③–④), among the cheapest **places to stay** on the island. Its simple en-suite bungalows are set around a small garden just across the road from the beach and there's Internet access here as well as bicycle and motorbike rental. Further south is *Pasai Cottage* (ⓣ076 597478; B600), whose six bamboo cottages have unexpectedly tasteful interiors, folding glass doors and prettily tiled bathrooms.

Beyond Hat Pasai, tiny **HAT LAEM SAI** is often known simply as **Hat Lom'Lae**, after the appealing Thai-Canadian-run ★ *Lom'Lae Bungalows* (ⓣ076 597486, ⓦwww.lomlae.com; ⑥, family houses ⑧–⑨) which sits on the shore. It's a beautiful, secluded haven, 500m down a track off the round-island road, backed by ricefields and rubber plantations and enjoying stunning bay views from its palm-fringed beach and grassy garden. The eight attractive, wooden, fan-cooled bungalows are widely spaced and have sliding doors, decks and hammocks to capitalize on the vistas. Some have additional upstairs loft beds, and there are two-bedroom family houses with kitchens available as well. Kayaks, bikes, motorbikes and windsurfers are available for rent and there's a dive shop here.

A few hundred metres west from the *Lom'Lae* turn-off, about 3km from Tha Kai, another side road takes you down towards **Laem Sai pier**, along a coast that has no real beach but is scenically dotted with houses on stilts, fishing platforms, dozens of longtails and some inviting views of Ko Yao Noi's larger twin, Ko Yao Yai, just across the channel. There are many **homestays** around here, participants in the REST community-based tourism initiative (ⓦwww.rest.or.th; see Basics p.31 for more on this), as well as a couple of **guest houses**. The British-Thai run *Lamsi Village Guest House* is a two-storey block of just eight good-quality tiled rooms, all with fan, TV and balcony (ⓣ081 978 4257; ⑤). About 1.5km further down the road, beyond where the paving stops, *Koh Yai Lam Sai Resort and Seafood* (ⓣ076 597345; ④) enjoys fine views across the water to Ko Yao Yai – it's a great place for a seafood lunch even if you're not staying in one of its six little en-suite fan huts located up the rise behind; the resort has bicycles for rent and there's a nice little beach 300m east around the rocks.

Tha Kai and north

The island's commercial and administrative centre is **THA KAI**, inland from the main piers on the southwest coast. This is where you'll find the post office, the hospital, the police station (ⓣ076 593123), the obligatory 7/11 shop, with ATM, as well as a couple of Internet centres, the main market, several roti stalls and a few simple Thai-food restaurants, including the welcoming *Drop In*, diagonally across from the 7/11.

The road running **north from Tha Kai**'s 7/11 is particularly scenic, taking you through several hamlets with their mosques and latex-pressing mangles, and past ricefields and their resident buffaloes, with mangroves in the middle distance, sea eagles hovering overhead, and the rounded hills of nearby sister island Ko Yao Yai in the background. At a junction about 3km from Thai Khai, the northbound road soon turns into a horrible track leading to Ao Loh Ha, while veering right will take you over the hill and down to Tha Khao on the east coast, about 4km away.

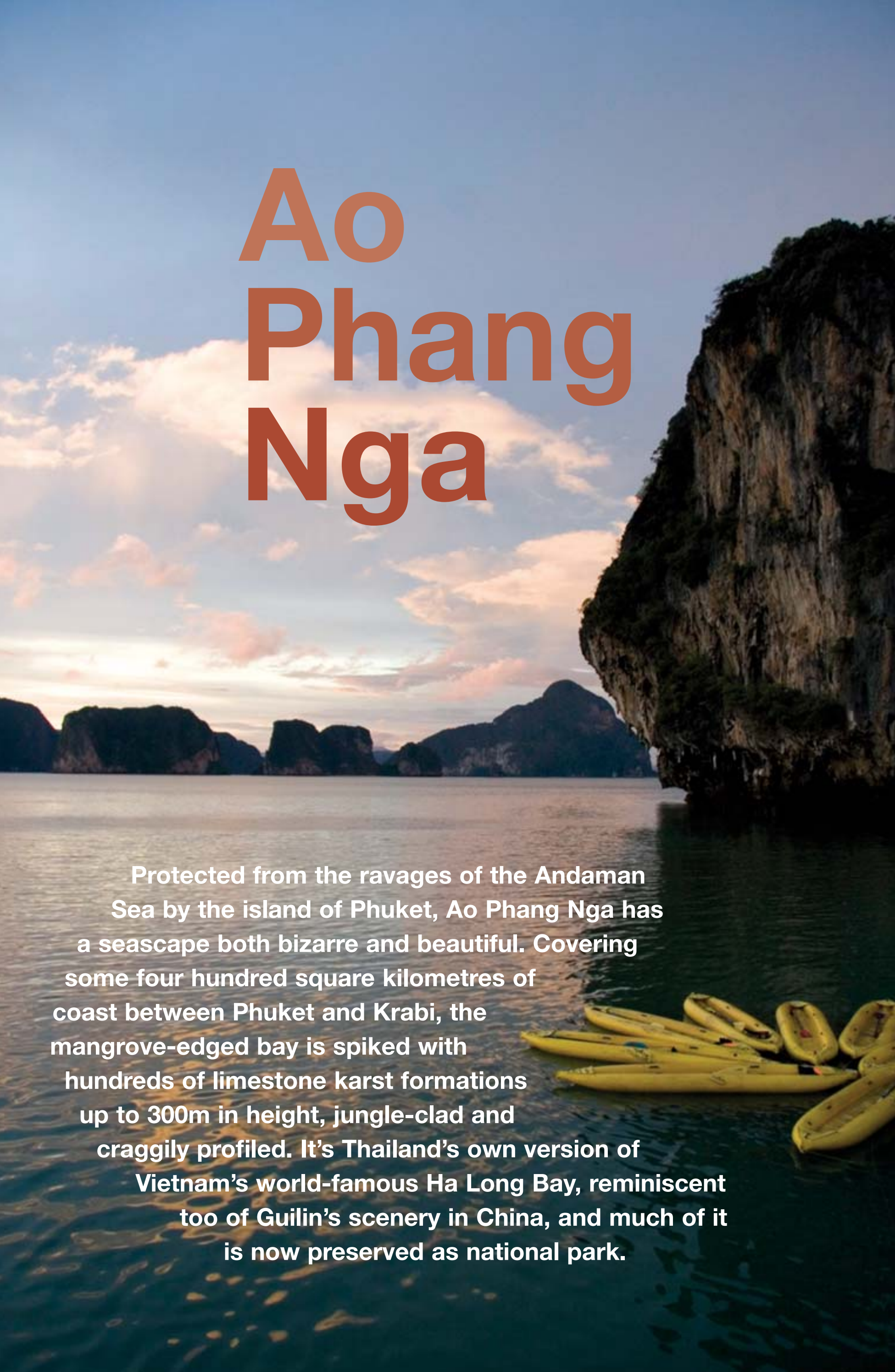
Within a couple of kilometres, the northbound road to **Ao Loh Ha**, Ko Yao Noi's northernmost beach, turns into a rough, four-wheel-drive-only track which finally ends at the deluxe thatched villas of *The Paradise Koh Yao* (ⓣ081 892 4878, ⓦwww.theparadise.biz; ⑨).

Ao Phang Nga

East of Phuket lies the Andaman coast's most spectacular natural attraction, the breathtakingly scenic seascape of **AO PHANG NGA**, a bay so important that much of it is preserved as **national park** (entry B200; Ⓦ www.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp). Embraced by Phuket to the west and the Krabi mainland to the east, the four-hundred-square-kilometre bay is fringed with mangroves and dotted with hundreds of sculptural limestone karst outcrops, some of which contain hidden hollows or *hongs* – roofless lagoons that can only be explored at certain tides and only by sea-canoe; for more on the clandestine environment inside these *hongs*, and on the formation of the bay and its karst islands, see the colour section on Ao Phang Nga. The main *hong* islands are in the **western** and **eastern** bay areas – to the west and east of Ko Yao Noi, which sits roughly midway between Phuket and Krabi and is described on p.418. But the most famous scenery is in the **central bay** area, south of Phang Nga town, which boasts the biggest concentration of karst islands, and the most weirdly shaped formations.

There are several **departure points** for tours of the bay and several ways of seeing its many attractions. The most rewarding, and generally the most expensive, option is to join a **sea-canoeing** trip (either guided or self-paddle), which enables you to get inside the *hongs* and, unhampered by a grinding engine, also means you've the best chance of spotting the wildlife that lives both inside and around the karst islands. Most sea-canoeing tours use large support boats carrying groups of up to 30 people; they can be arranged from any resort in Phuket, at Khao Lak, at all Krabi beaches and islands, and on Ko Yao Noi (see relevant resort accounts for details and prices), but the itinerary is usually determined by your departure point,

△ Ao Phang Nga



Ao Phang Nga

Protected from the ravages of the Andaman Sea by the island of Phuket, Ao Phang Nga has a seascape both bizarre and beautiful. Covering some four hundred square kilometres of coast between Phuket and Krabi, the mangrove-edged bay is spiked with hundreds of limestone karst formations up to 300m in height, jungle-clad and craggily profiled. It's Thailand's own version of Vietnam's world-famous Ha Long Bay, reminiscent too of Guilin's scenery in China, and much of it is now preserved as national park.

Karst islands

The bay is thought to have been formed about twelve thousand years ago when a dramatic rise in sea level at the end of the Ice Age flooded the limestone ranges, which over millions of years had been eroded by acidic rainwater. Some of these **karst islands** have been further weathered in such a way that they are now hollow, secreting lagoons or *hongs* that can only be accessed at certain tides and only by sea canoe. Others are famous for their dramatic, evocative silhouettes, which are highly photogenic, particularly in the misty light of dawn, or at sunset.

Karst islands

The main *hong* islands are in the **western bay** area, near Phuket, and in the **eastern bay** area, between Ko Yao Noi and Krabi. The most scenic concentration of artistically sculpted karst islands is in the **central bay** area, near the town of Phang Nga, and this is where you'll

Tours of the bay

Tours of the bay, by tour boat, longtail or sea canoe, can be arranged from any resort on **Phuket**, from **Khao Lak**, from any of the Krabi beaches and islands – **Krabi town, Ao Nang, Klong Muang, Laem Phra Nang, Ko Phi Phi** – from **Phang Nga town** and from **Ko Yao Noi**; see relevant accounts for details and prices. The most rewarding are those that feature **sea-canoeing**, as this enables you both to explore inside the *hongs* and to observe at close quarters the unique ecosystems around and inside the karst islands. However, all the main areas of the bay are extremely popular so don't expect a solitary experience.

Entering a *hong*

find so-called **James Bond Island**, location for the movie *The Man with the Golden Gun*, as well as the famously quaint stilt-village island of **Ko Panyi**, one of only relatively few inhabited islands in Ao Phang Nga.

The hongs

Hongs are the *pièce de résistance* of Ao Phang Nga: invisible to any passing vessel, these hidden tidal lagoons are roofless caves enclosed within the core of seemingly impenetrable limestone outcrops, accessible via murky tunnels that can only be navigated at certain tides in sea canoes small enough to slip beneath and between low-lying rocky overhangs. Like the islands themselves, the *hongs* ("rooms" in Thai) have taken millions of years to form, with the softer limestone hollowed out from the side by the pounding waves, and from above by the wind and the rain. Eventually, when the *hong*'s roof collapsed and the two hollows met, the interior of the karst formation was able to receive sufficient light to support its own ecosystem, around and above the tidal lagoon.

The most spectacular *hongs* lie within the island of **Ko Panak**, in the western bay, where limestone cliffs hide tunnels to no less than five different tidal lagoons. Other commonly visited *hongs* include **Ko Hong**, also in the western bay, and **Ko Lao Bileh** (also sometimes known as Ko Hong) in the eastern bay.

The secret world of the hong

The world inside these collapsed cave systems is an extraordinary one, protected from the open bay by a turreted ring of cliff faces hung with vertiginous **prehistoric-looking gardens** of upside-down cycads, twisted bonsai palms, lianas, miniature screw pines and tangled ferns. And as the tide withdraws, the *hong*'s resident creatures emerge to forage on the muddy floor, among them fiddler crabs, mudskippers, dusky langurs and crab-eating macaques, with white-bellied sea eagles often hovering overhead. Viewed from the intimate proximity of a sea canoe, a *hong* island's **exterior walls** reveal an equally fascinating ecosystem. Red, yellow and orange encrusting sponges flourish along the tide-line, interspersed with oyster shells and primitive eight-valved molluscs known as chitons – all of which provide good camouflage for the scuttling red, blue and black crabs.

Mangrove mazes

Mangroves have colonized the mud flats inside most *hongs*, but the biggest, creepiest, most fascinating **mangrove swamps** are those that fringe the mainland coastline of the central and eastern bay areas, particularly around **Phang Nga town, Ao Thalen** and **Ao Luk**. Here, hundreds of mangrove-clogged inlets are just waiting to be explored, their labyrinthine networks of tidal channels harbouring further clandestine worlds, which, like *hongs*, are only really open to canoeists, and only at certain tides.

Life in a mangrove swamp

At high tide only the upper branches of the various species of mangrove are visible, most of them thick with the glossy, dark-green leaves designed to excrete excess salt. But as the tide recedes, the swamps become ever more unearthly, their exposed **aerial roots** forming a tangled mass of gnarled and knotted archways above the muddy sea floor. These roots absorb oxygen and are fundamental to the mangrove's breathing apparatus, but they also trap water-borne debris brought in by the tides, thus gradually extending the swamp area both by reclaiming land from the sea and by simultaneously nurturing fertile conditions for the new, metre-long, mangrove seedlings.

Mangrove-swamp mud hosts its own cast of creatures, among them the **mudskipper**, a specially adapted fish that can absorb atmospheric oxygen through its skin as long as it keeps its outsides damp – which is why mudskippers spend so much time slithering around in the sludge. They move through the mud in tiny hops by flicking their tails, aided by their extra-strong pectoral fins. Another intriguing inhabitant is the **fiddler crab**, named after the male's single outsized reddish claw, which it brandishes for communication and defence purposes; the claw is so powerful it could open a can of baked beans. Where there are crabs, chances are there may also be a clan of **crab-eating macaques**. Unusually among primates, these monkeys take pleasure in diving and swimming, though mostly they'll wait for low tide to winkle out crabs and molluscs, snacking on fruit in between times.

As well as providing a home for hungry primates, needy crustaceans and strange fish, mangrove swamps play a vital role in helping to **prevent coastal erosion**. Their roots stabilize shifting mud and help protect shorelines from the impact of tropical storms – as was proved along some parts of the Andaman coast during the 2004 tsunami. Their ecological importance makes the ongoing destruction of mangrove forests all along Thailand's coasts – to make way for prawn farms, and for producing commercial charcoal – an increasingly significant issue.

with Phuket trips focusing on the western bay and Krabi tours concentrating on the eastern half. Most tours of the central bay are either in large **tour boats** booked out of Phuket or Krabi, which generally feature snorkelling and beach stops rather than kayaking, or in inexpensive, small-group **longtail boats** that depart from Phang Nga town, Phuket and Ko Yao Noi. The bay is very popular so be prepared for crowds at almost every stop.

The central bay

On tours of the **central bay**, the standard itinerary follows either a circular or a figure-of-eight route, passing extraordinary karst silhouettes that change character with the shifting light – in the eerie glow of an early-morning mist it can be an especially memorable experience. Some of the formations have nicknames suggested by their weird outlines – like **Khao Machu** (**Marju**), which translates as "Pekinese Rock". Others have titles derived from other attributes – **Tham Nak** (or Nark, meaning Naga Cave) gets its name from the serpentine stalagmites inside; **Ko Thalu** (Pierced Cave) has a tunnel through it; and a close inspection of **Khao Kien** (Painting Rock) reveals a cliff wall decorated with paintings of elephants, monkeys, fish, crabs and hunting weapons, believed to be between three thousand and five thousand years old.

Ao Phang Nga's most celebrated features, however, earned their tag from a movie: the cleft **Khao Ping Gan** (Leaning Rock) and its tapered outcrop **Khao Tapu** (Nail Rock) are better known as **James Bond Island**, having starred as Scaramanga's hideaway in *The Man with the Golden Gun*. Every boat stops off here so tourists can pose in front of the iconic rock (whose narrowing base is a good example of how wave action is shaping the bay) and the island crawls with seashell and trinket vendors.

The central bay's other must-see attraction is **Ko Panyi**, a Muslim village built almost entirely on stilts around the rock that supports the mosque. Nearly all boat tours stop here for lunch, so you're best off avoiding the pricey seafood restaurants around the jetty and heading instead towards the islanders' foodstalls near the mosque. You can enjoy a more tranquil experience of Ko Panyi by joining one of the overnight tours from Phang Nga town (see p.427), which include an evening meal and guest-house accommodation on the island – and the chance to watch the sun set and rise over the bay; you can also rent a sea canoe from the jetty (B300/hr) and go exploring yourself.

At some point on your central-bay tour you should pass several small brick **kilns** on the edge of a mangrove swamp, which were once used for producing charcoal from mangrove wood. You'll also be ferried beneath **Tham Lod**, a photogenic archway roofed with stalactites and opening onto spectacular limestone and mangrove vistas.

The western bay: Ko Panak and Ko Hong

The star of **the western bay** is **Ko Panak**, which harbours an amazing five different *hongs* within its hollowed heart. These are probably Ao Phang Nga's most spectacular hidden worlds, the pitch-black tunnel approaches infested by bats and the bright, roofless *hongs* an entire other world, draped in hanging gardens of lianas, miniature screw pines and pandanus palms and busy with cicadas and the occasional family of crab-eating macaques. Western-bay tours also usually take in nearby **Ko Hong** (different from the Ko Hong in the eastern bay), whose exterior walls are coated with encrusting sponges and busy with tiny crabs, while the dark, interior passageways light up with bioluminescent plankton and lead to a series of cave lagoons.

The eastern bay: Ko Hong, Ao Thalen and Ao Luk

The principal *hong* island in the **eastern bay**, known both as **Ko Hong** and **Ko Lao Bileh**, lies about midway between Krabi's Hat Klong Muang beach and the southeast coast of Ko Yao Noi. The island is encircled by white-sand beaches and is a popular snorkelling destination as its aquamarine waters are so clear that the surrounding reef and its plentiful fish are clearly visible from the surface. The island's actual *hong* lacks the drama of Ao Phang Nga's best *hongs* because it's not fully enclosed or accessed via dark tunnels as at Ko Panak, but it is pretty, full of starfish, and tidal, so can only be explored at certain times.

The eastern bay's other big attractions are the mangrove-fringed inlets along the mainland coast between Krabi and Phang Nga, particularly around **Ao Thalen** (aka Ao Talin or Talane) and **Ao Luk**. Trips around here take you through complex networks of channels that weave through the mangrove swamps, between fissures in the limestone cliffs, beneath karst outcrops and into the occasional cave. Many of these passageways are hongs, isolated havens that might be up to 2km long, all but cut off from the main bay and accessible only at certain tides. The **Ban Bor Tor** (aka Ban Bho Tho) area of Ao Luk bay is especially known for **Tham Lod**, a long tunnel hung with stalagmites and stalactites whose entrance is obscured by vines, and for nearby **Tham Phi Hua Toe**, whose walls display around a hundred prehistoric cave-paintings, as well as some interestingly twisted stalactite formations.

Phang Nga town and around

Friendly if unexciting little **PHANG NGA TOWN**, approximately midway between Phuket and Krabi, serves mainly as a point from which to organize budget longtail trips around the impressive karst islands of Ao Phang Nga. But there are also several caves and waterfalls nearby, accessible either on cheap tours run by every Phang Nga tour operator, or by motorbike. It's also possible to arrange trips from Phang Nga agencies to Ko Similan (B2900 for a day-trip or B3900 overnight), and Ko Surin (B3000/4900). The pier for boats to Ao Phang Nga is at Tha Dan, 9km south of town and served by songthaews, though transport to the pier is included in the tour price. For a description of the bay, see the colour section on Ao Phang Nga, and p.424.

Practicalities

All **buses** from Phuket and Takua Pa to Krabi pass through Phang Nga town about midway along their routes, dropping passengers at the bus station (☎076 412014) on Thanon Phetkasem, located towards the northern end of this long, thin town. Phang Nga runs half-hourly buses to and from Phuket, Krabi and Trang, and there are five air-con departures a day to Surat Thani, with the 9.30am and 11.30am services timed to link up with the Ko Samui boats. If you're heading to or from Khao Lak or Khao Sok, it's faster to get a bus to Khokkloi (40min) and then change for Khao Lak (1hr). Taxis from Phang Nga to Khao Lak cost about B1000 and to Khao Sok about B1200. If you want to go straight to the bay, change onto a songthaew bound for **Tha Dan** (B20); the pier is 9km to the south.

There's no official **tourist information**, but the several tour operators inside the bus station compound are helpful and will store your baggage for a few hours;

they also sell bus and boat tickets for onward journeys to Krabi, Trang, Ko Phi Phi, Ko Lanta and Ko Samui.

Turning right (north) out of the bus station onto Thanon Phetkasem, you'll find **banks**, with exchange counters and ATMs and several **Internet** centres. Most other municipal facilities are further south down Thanon Phetkasem: the **police station** (Ⓣ076 430390) and immigration office (Ⓣ076 412011) are about 500m south of the bus station, off Soi Thungchedi, the **telephone office** is another 100m south of them, and Phang Nga Hospital (Ⓣ076 412034) and the **post office** are over 2km south of the bus station.

Accommodation and eating

Phang Nga's best budget **hotels** are all within 250m of each other and the bus station, on the bus station side of Thanon Phetkasem. First up, on the right-hand side as you turn right out of the bus station, is the welcoming *Ratanapong Hotel* at no. 111 (Ⓣ076 411247; fan ②, air-con ③), which gets the most custom, offering en-suite fan and air-con rooms and a roof terrace. A few doors further on, the modern, well-liked *Phang Nga Guest House* (Ⓣ076 411358; fan ②, air ③) has clean and comfortable en-suite rooms, though few have anything but a brick-wall view, while the old-style *Thawisuk Hotel* at no. 77 (Ⓣ076 412100; ①) has large, slightly cheaper fan rooms and a rooftop terrace. The most upmarket accommodation in town is at *Phang Nga Inn* (Ⓣ076 411963; ④–⑥), which is clearly signed to the left of the bus station, about 250m away, at 2/2 Soi Lohakji, just off the town's main road. It's the former family home of the people who also own the *Phang Nga Guest House*, and the seventeen rooms here are all attractively furnished and equipped with air-con and TV, the price depending on the size of the room. Down at Tha Dan pier, the *Phang Nga Bay Resort* (Ⓣ076 412067, Ⓕ076 412070; ⑤–⑥) has a swimming pool and all rooms have balcony views of the mangrove-lined estuary.

For **eating**, the *Vorapin*, diagonally across from the *Ratanapong Hotel*, offers cheapish Thai and Chinese standards, or there's pizza, sandwiches and other western dishes at *Ivy*, further along the road at no. 38. There's also a tiny vegetarian canteen (*raan ahaan jeh*; daily 6.30am until about 2pm) on Thanon Phetkasem, about 100m walk left out of the bus station, which serves the usual array of exceptionally cheap veggie curries and stir-fries over brown rice.

Tours of Ao Phang Nga

The most popular budget tours of Ao Phang Nga are the **longtail-boat trips** run by tour operators based inside Phang Nga bus station. Competition between these outfits is fierce and the itineraries they offer are almost identical (see p.424 for a description), so it's best to get recommendations from other tourists fresh from a bay trip, especially as reputations fluctuate with every change of staff. To date the one that's remained most constant is Mr Kean Tour (Ⓣ076 430619); next door but one is Sayan Tour (Ⓣ076 430348, Ⓦwww.sayantour.com). Both offer half-day tours of the bay (daily at about 8am & 2pm; 3–4hr) costing B450 per person (minimum four people), as well as full-day extensions, which last until 4pm and cost B750, including lunch; take the 8am tour to avoid seeing the bay at its most crowded. These prices exclude the B200 national park entry fee. All tours include a chance to swim in the bay, and most offer the option of an hour's canoeing around Ko Thalu as well, for an extra B300. The tours leave from the tour operators' offices, but will pick up from the town's hotels if booked in advance; people staying at Tha Dan, the departure-point for trips around Ao Phang Nga, can join the tours at the pier.

All tour operators also offer the chance to **stay** overnight at a guest house on **Ko Panyi**. This can be tacked onto the half- or full-day tour for an extra B250 (departures at 8am, 2pm & 4pm); dinner, accommodation, and morning coffee are included in the price. Mr Kean also offers an interesting alternative overnight programme on his home island of **Ban Mai Phai**, a much less commercial version of Ko Panyi; the B1100 fee includes all food, accommodation, plus cycle and kayak use and the chance to trek and go rock-climbing.

Around Phang Nga town

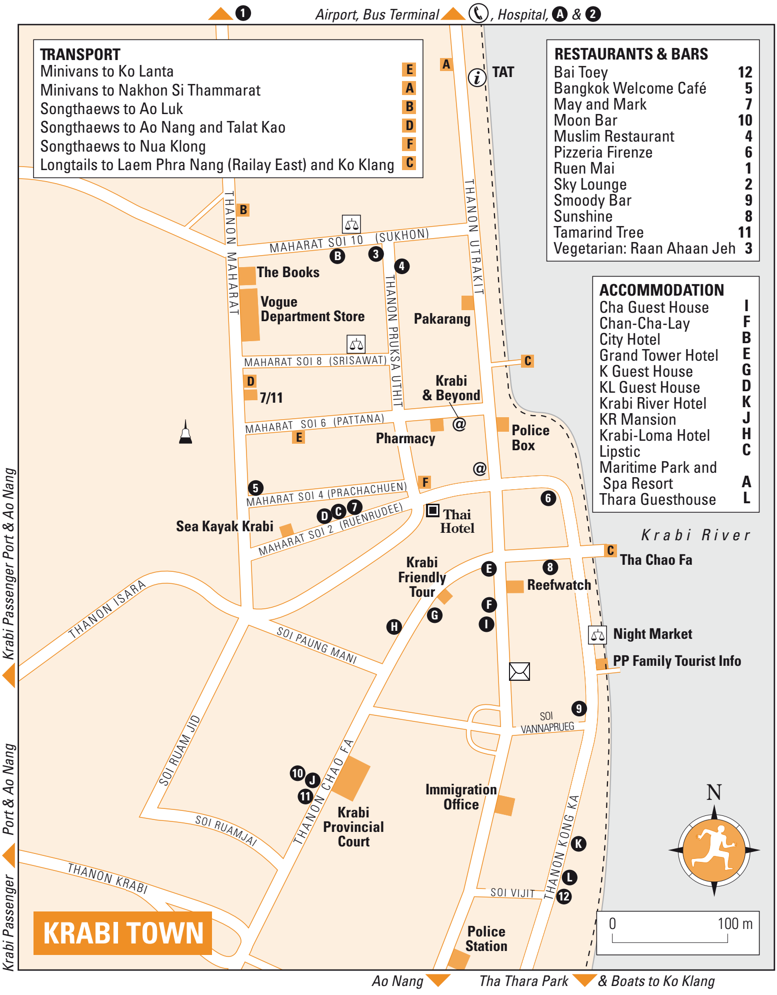
One of the most famous caves near Phang Nga town is **Tham Phung Chang**, or **Elephant Belly Cave**, a natural 1200-metre-long tunnel through the massive 800-metre-high wooded cliff that towers over the Provincial Hall, about 4km west of the town centre. With a bit of imagination, the cliff's outline resembles a kneeling elephant, and the hollow interior is, of course, its belly. It's possible to travel through the elephant's belly to the other side of the cliff and back on organized two-hour excursions that involve wading, rafting and canoeing along the freshwater stream, Khlong Tham, that has eroded the channel. Any Phang Nga tour operator can arrange this for you, or you can organize it yourself at the desk in the car park in front of the cliff (afternoons are quieter) for B500. To get to the cave entrance yourself, exit Phang Nga along the Phuket–Krabi highway and watch for signs – and a large statue of an elephant – on the north side of the road, before the highway forks right for Phuket and left for Krabi.

Another quite popular local attraction is **Sa Nang Manora Forest Park** (free entry), 9km north of the bus station, where there are ten hiking tails to explore plus several waterfalls with swimmable pools. Tour agencies will take you there for about B250; with your own transport, continue north through town along Thanon Phetkasem for about 5km, until you pick up signs for the park.

Krabi town and around

The compact little fishing town of **KRABI** is both provincial capital and major hub for onward travel to some of the region's most popular islands and beaches, including Ko Phi Phi, Ko Lanta, Ao Nang, Klong Muang and Laem Phra Nang (Railay). So efficient are the transport links that you don't really need to stop here, but it's an attractive, refreshingly green spot, strung out along the west bank of the Krabi estuary, with mangrove-lined shorelines to the east, looming limestone outcrops on every horizon, and plenty of welcoming guest houses, so it's both possible and enjoyable to base yourself here and make day-trips to the Krabi beaches (see p.436), 45 minutes' ride away by boat or songthaew. A good way to appreciate the town's setting is to follow the paved **riverside walkway** down to the fishing port, about 800m south of Tha Chao Fa; several hotels capitalize on the views here, across the estuary to mangrove-ringed Ko Klang, and towards the southern end the walkway borders the pleasant municipal Thara Park. Inland, in the centre of town, you can't miss the bizarre sculptures of hulking **anthropoid apes** clutching two sets of traffic lights apiece at the Thanon Maharat/Soi 10 crossroads. They are meant to represent Krabi's hugely significant ancestors, the tailless *Siamopithecus oceanus*, whose 40-million-year-old remains were found in a lignite mine in the south of the province and are believed by scientists to be among the earliest examples worldwide of the ape-human evolutionary process.

Krabi is at its busiest during high season, from November to February, a period which officially begins with the annual **Krabi Berk Fah Andaman festival**, a week of festivities featuring parades, outdoor concerts, fishing contests, a funfair


KRABI TOWN
TRANSPORT
Minivans to Ko Lanta E
Minivans to Nakhon Si Thammarat A
Songthaews to Ao Luk B
Songthaews to Ao Nang and Talat Kao D
Songthaews to Nua Klong F
Longtails to Laem Phra Nang (Railay East) and Ko Klang C
RESTAURANTS & BARS
Bai Toey 12
Bangkok Welcome Café 5
May and Mark 7
Moon Bar 10
Muslim Restaurant 4
Pizzeria Firenze 6
Ruen Mai 1
Sky Lounge 2
Smoody Bar 9
Sunshine 8
Tamarind Tree 11
Vegetarian: Raan Ahaan Jeh 3
ACCOMMODATION
Cha Guest House I
Chan-Cha-Lay F
City Hotel B
Grand Tower Hotel E
K Guest House G
KL Guest House D
Krabi River Hotel K
KR Mansion J
Krabi-Loma Hotel H
Lipstic C
Maritime Park and Spa Resort A
Thara Guesthouse L
1
Airport, Bus Terminal
Hospital, A & 2
TAT
THANON MAHARAT
THANON UTRAKIT
MAHARAT SOI 10 (SUKHON)
The Books
Vogue Department Store
THANON PRUKSA UTHIT
Pakarang
MAHARAT SOI 8 (SRISAWAT)
7/11
Krabi & Beyond
MAHARAT SOI 6 (PATTANA)
Pharmacy
Police Box
MAHARAT SOI 4 (PRACHACHUEN)
Thai Hotel
Sea Kayak Krabi
MAHARAT SOI 2 (RUENRUDEE)
Krabi River
Tha Chao Fa
Krabi Friendly Tour
Reefwatch
THANON ISARA
SOI PAUNG MANI
Night Market
PP Family Tourist Info
SOI VANNAPRUEG
SOI RUAM JID
THANON CHAO FA
SOI RUAMJAI
Krabi Provincial Court
Immigration Office
THANON KONG KA
SOI VIJIT
Police Station
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Krabi Passenger Port & Ao Nang
Krabi Passenger Port & Ao Nang
Ao Nang
Tha Thara Park
& Boats to Ko Klang

and lots of street stalls that climaxes at Loy Krathong, the nationwide festival celebrated in late October or early November (see Basics p.57).

Arrival, transport and information

Thai Airways and Air Asia operate several daily domestic **flights** between Bangkok and Krabi. International routes are currently limited to flights from Singapore (on Tiger Air) and Stockholm (on Nova Airlines), but the airport is expanding and several new European routes should be running by 2007. Krabi International **airport** (☎075 691940) is 18km east of town, just off Highway 4. Fixed-price taxis meet all flights, charging B350 to Krabi, B600 to Ao Nang and B700–900 to Klong Muang (maximum four passengers). Budget **car rental** has a desk in the airport arrivals area (☎075 691938, Ⓦwww.budget.co.th), as do Avis

Moving on from Krabi town

Ferries to Ko Phi Phi and Ko Lanta leave from the airport-style terminal at **Krabi Passenger Port** (sometimes referred to as Tha Khlong Jilad; ⓣ075 620052) outside Krabi town, a couple of kilometres to the southwest. Ferry tickets bought from tour operators in town should include a free transfer from central Krabi or your guest house, though any Ao Nang-bound songthaew will also go via the port if requested (a ride of about ten minutes; B30). All tour operators post the ferry timetables on their walls: at the time of writing, ferries **to Ko Phi Phi** depart daily at 10am and 3pm (2hr; B300). Ferries **to Ko Lanta**, via **Ko Jum**, only run from mid-October to mid-May, departing at 11am and 2pm (B350/300); at other times you need to go by songthaew or minibus (see p.467). Air-con **minivans to Ko Lanta** depart year-round from a shop on Thanon Maharat Soi 6 (hourly 7am–5pm; 2hr; B200). Longtail boats for **East Railay** on Laem Phra Nang (45min; B70) leave on demand from the town-centre piers at Tha Chao Fa on Thanon Kongka and nearby on Thanon Utrakit. Boats **to Ko Yao Noi** leave from the pier at Ao Thalen (2 daily at 11am & 1pm; 1hr), about 30km northwest of Krabi town; songthaews to the pier leave from near the Vogue Department Store on Thanon Maharat at 10am and noon (B50).

You can buy combination bus and train tickets **to Bangkok** via Surat Thani (2 daily; 16hr; B600–850) from any travel agent; these firms also sell tickets on private tourist buses, minibuses and/or boats to **Phuket beaches** (daily; 4hr; B250–300), **Ko Samui** (2 daily; 6hr; B350–450), **Ko Pha Ngan** (2 daily; 6hr; B500), Bangkok's **Thanon Khao San** (daily; 14hr; B600; see warnings on p.40), **Penang** (2 daily; 9hr; B650) and **Langkawi** (daily; 10hr; B700). Note that despite the advertising, nearly all these privately operated tourist buses are minibuses and they are often quite dilapidated. Private minivans to Nakhon Si Thammarat (approximately hourly 7.30am–4pm; 3hr) leave from Thanon Utrakit, across from the TAT office. **Government buses** run to all major destinations – including Bangkok, Phuket, Phang Nga, Surat Thani and Trang (see Travel Details on p.481 for info on frequencies and duration) – from Krabi's Talat Kao bus terminal (ⓣ075 611804), which is 5km from town and served by frequent songthaews from the town centre. If travelling to Khao Sok or Khao Lak you may have to change buses at Khokkloi.

Any hotel or travel agent can arrange transport **to the airport** at rates equivalent to those charged by the airport taxis at Arrivals.

(ⓣ075 691941; ⓦavisthailand.com) and National/SMT (ⓣ075 691939, ⓦwww.smtrentacar.com).

Direct air-con and VIP **buses** from Bangkok depart from the Southern Bus Terminal, mainly in the late afternoon or evening and take about twelve hours; see p.40 for warnings about the private buses direct from Thanon Khao San. Ordinary and air-con buses run hourly to Krabi from Surat Thani (2–3hr), so if you're travelling from Bangkok, you could take an overnight **train** to Surat Thani and then pick up a Krabi bus. There are also half-hourly buses from Phuket via Phang Nga; if travelling from Khao Sok or Khao Lak you may have to change buses at Khokkloi. Only a few buses drop their passengers in central Krabi: most pull in at the **bus terminal** 5km north of town in the village of Talat Kao, which stands at the intersection of Thanon Utrakit and Highway 4. From here there's a frequent songthaew service to Krabi's Thanon Maharat.

Most of the public **songthaew** services to local beaches, towns and attractions leave from outside the 7/11 just south of the Soi 8 intersection on Thanon Maharat; they usually circulate around town and along Thanon Utrakit before heading out; unless otherwise stated, most run at least twice an hour from dawn till noon, and then less frequently until dusk. Useful destinations include **Ao Nang** (6am–6.30pm, B30; 6.30–10.30pm, B50), via Krabi Passenger Port and Hat Noppharat

Thara (6am–about 6.30pm only; B30) and Wat Tham Seua. The Ao Luk service departs from just north of the Soi 10 intersection (every 30min; B40).

Information

Krabi's **TAT office** (daily 8.30am–4.30pm ⓣ075 622163, ⓔtatkrabi@tat.or.th) is housed in a lone whitewashed hut on Thanon Utrakit at the northern edge of the town centre. Don't confuse this with the tourist information office run by the ferry operator PP Family, which is down on Thanon Kongka; you can get information here, but it may be partisan. The town has no shortage of **tour agents**, all of whom will be only too happy to sell you bus, boat and train tickets, and to fix you up with a room on one of the islands – a service that may be worth using for your first night's island or beach accommodation, as Ko Phi Phi especially gets packed out during peak season.

The monthly free, independent, **tourist magazine**, *Flyer* (ⓦwww.yourkrabi.com), carries features on local sights and activities and rounds up general transport information in the Krabi, Laem Phra Nang and Ao Nang area; it's available at some restaurants and guest houses. If you're spending some time in this region, it's worth buying a copy of *Krabi: Caught in the Spell – A Guide to Thailand's Enchanted Province*, expat environmentalist Thom Henley's lively and opinionated **book** about Krabi people, islands and traditions, which is packed with enticing photographs and ideas for exploratory day-trips; see "Books" on p.537 for details.

Accommodation

The guest houses and small hotels in Krabi offer a good range of **accommodation** that's mostly a lot better value than equivalent options on nearby beaches.

Cha Guest House 45 Thanon Utrakit ⓣ075 611141, ⓔchaguesthouse@hotmail.com. Busy, long-standing travellers' hangout, with basic rooms in bungalows set round a garden compound behind an Internet centre. Room rates depend on size and whether you want a private bathroom. Also has very cheap, cell-like singles. Shared bathroom ①, en suite ②–③

Chan-Cha-Lay 55 Thanon Utrakit ⓣ075 620952. With its stylish blue and white theme throughout, funky bathrooms, white-painted wooden furniture and blue shutters, this is the most charming and arty place to stay in Krabi. The en suites in the garden come with fan or air-con and are by far the nicest option; rooms in the main building share bathrooms and some don't have windows. Shared bathroom ②, en suite fan ③, air-con ④

City Hotel 15/2-4 Maharat Soi 10 ⓣ075 611961, ⓦwww.citykrabi.com. Good-quality if not exactly stylish air-con rooms, all with TV and hot water. Rooms in the new wing are more modern and pricier. Old wing ④, new wing ⑤

Grand Tower Hotel 9 Thanon Chao Fa, on the corner of Thanon Utrakit ⓣ075 621456. Central, fairly comfortable five-storey travellers' hotel with well-furnished if scruffy rooms, all of them en suite and some with TV and air-con. Some rooms can be noisy because of the bar next door. Internet access and a travel agency downstairs. Fan ②, air-con ④

K Guest House 15–25 Thanon Chao Fa ⓣ075 623166, ⓦwww.krabidir.com/kguesthouse. Deservedly popular option, in a peaceful but central spot, contained within a long, timber-clad log-cabin-look rowhouse, partially screened by a row of towering pot plants. The attractive upstairs rooms have wooden floors and panelled walls and mostly have streetside balconies. Also offers some cheaper, less interesting rooms with shared bathroom downstairs and at the back. Shared bathroom ②, en suite ③

KL Guest House 28 Soi 2, Thanon Maharat ⓣ075 612511. No frills, budget option; all rooms have a fan and shared bathroom, but the cheapest have no window. ①

Krabi River Hotel 73/1 Thanon Kongka ⓣ075 612321, ⓔkrabiriver@hotmail.com. In a little cluster of accommodation occupying a scenic spot beside the estuary on the southern edge of Krabi town, a few minutes' walk south of Tha Chao Fa pier, this place offers high-standard air-con rooms: the best have big balconies overlooking the river; the smaller, cheaper ones look onto the wall of the adjacent hotel. ④, river view ⑥

KR Mansion 52 Thanon Chao Fa ☎075 612761, ⓦwww.kr-mansion.com. Traveller-oriented five-storey hotel with a range of pretty decent fan and air-con rooms, with or without private bathroom, pleasingly enlivened by chic touches (photos, vases, designer lamps); the uppermost ones offer fine panoramic views. Staff are a good source of local information, and there's a nice rooftop bar, Internet access, nightly movies and motorbike rental. Fan ②, air-con ③

Krabi-Loma Hotel 20 Thanon Chao Fa ☎075 611168. Small hotel offering uninspired though perfectly comfortable mid-market air-con rooms, with the main attraction being the small swimming pool and garden. ④

Lipstic 20–22 Soi 2, Thanon Maharat ☎075 612392, ⓔkayanchalee@hotmail.com. Good budget choice tucked away off the street with simple, well-priced rooms; some have windows and others have private bathrooms, but none have both. Shared bathroom ①, en suite ②

Maritime Park and Spa Resort 2km north of town off Thanon Utrakit ☎075 620028, ⓦwww.maritimeparkandspa.com. Beautifully located luxury hotel, set beside the limestone karsts and mangroves of the Krabi River. Rooms are attractive and have fine views. There's a big pool, a spa, a kids' games room and babysitting service. Free scheduled shuttles to Krabi town and the beach at Ao Nang. ⑧–⑨

Thara Guesthouse 79/3 Thanon Kongka ☎075 630499 ⓔmilkgirl@hotmail.com. Small hotel, prettily set beside the estuary on the southern edge of Krabi town, a few minutes' walk south of Tha Chao Fa pier, with clean, well-maintained fan and air-con rooms, the best of which enjoy partial river views. Fan ②, air-con ④

Eating and drinking

Krabi has plenty of traveller-oriented restaurants, the best of which are detailed below, but for a truly inexpensive Thai meal, either go to the riverside **night market**, which sets up around the pier-head on Thanon Kongka every evening from about 6pm, try the inland market on Maharat Soi 10, or walk south down the riverside walkway, past *Krabi River Hotel* to reach an open-air riverside food court.

Bai Toey Next to *Thara Guesthouse* on Thanon Kongka. Good place for a sundowner with pleasing river views and great seafood, especially spicy mussels salad. Most dishes B60–180.

Bangkok Welcome Café On the corner of Thanon Maharat Soi 4 and Thanon Maharat itself. Fried rice, *phat thai* and noodle soups for B25 a serving. Daily 6am–4pm.

May and Mark Early hours, home-baked bread, including sourdough loaves, and full-English fry-ups (B100) make this a popular spot for breakfast. Also does tacos, Thai standards and pizzas. Daily 6.30am–9.30pm.

Moon Bar Top floor of KR Mansion, Thanon Chao Fa. It's well worth climbing the stairs to this breezy rooftop bar before sunset to soak up the distant mountain and estuary views while you work your way through the cocktail menu. Also serves some food. Daily 4pm–1am.

Muslim Restaurant Thanon Pruksa Uthit. Filling rotis (flat fried breads) served with a choice of curry sauces, from B10. Daily 7am–7pm.

Pizzeria Firenze Thanon Kongka. Authentic Italian dishes, including 20 different pizzas (from B150), pastas, ice creams, tiramisu (B75) and imported wines. Daily 11am–10pm.

Ruen Mai About 2km north of the town centre on Thanon Maharat. Popular with locals and well regarded, this inviting, artfully planted garden restaurant is worth making the effort to get to, not least for the change from the more touristed options in the town centre. It serves quality Thai dishes (B60–180), including lots of seafood and *tom yam*. Run by the same man behind *Same Same But Different* restaurant on Ko Lanta. Daily 11am–9pm

Sky Lounge *Maritime Park and Spa Resort,* 2km north of the town centre off Thanon Utrakit. Fabulous views from the eighth floor bar at Krabi's poshest hotel – a great place for a sunset beer as you're admiring the riverine landscape of karsts and mangrove swamps. Nightly 6pm–midnight.

Smoody Bar Thanon Kongka. Nightly live music and reasonably priced beer at this funky, atmospheric bar just back from the waterfront at the edge of the night market. Nightly from 5pm.

Sunshine Thanon Kongka. Travellers' restaurant, serving standard Thai and Western dishes (B40–60) and set breakfasts, including some with croissants, real coffee, curries and burgers. Daily 8am–10pm.

Tamarind Tree Next to KR Mansion at 52 Thanon Chao Fa. Housed in a pleasant plant-filled wooden building, this is one of the few restaurants in Krabi that appeals both to travellers and locals – its spicy yam salads and curries, especially the piquant matsaman curries (B60) are authentically flavoured, plus there are plenty of sandwiches and fish dishes. Daily 10am–10pm.

Vegetarian: Raan Ahaan Jeh Thanon Pruksa Uthit. Typical unpretentious Thai veggie café serving meat-substitute curries and stir-fries at B20 for two servings over rice. Mon–Sat 9am–5pm.

Listings

Airlines Any Krabi tour operator can book you a flight, or contact the airlines direct: Air Asia, at the airport (ⓣ075 623554); Thai Airways, beside *Maritime Park Resort Krabi* on Thanon Utrakit ⓣ075 622440.

Banks and exchange All major banks have branches on Thanon Utrakit with exchange counters and ATMs.

Bookshops The Books, next to Vogue Department Store on Thanon Maharat, carries a range of new English-language books about Thailand, plus maps and some novels. Pakarang on Thanon Utrakit buys and sells second-hand books and has lots in stock.

Car rental At Krabi airport (see p.429), and through some guest houses and tour companies, including Krabi Friendly Tour at 13/6 Thanon Chao Fa (ⓣ075 612558, ⓦwww.krabifriendly.com), which rents jeeps for B1200 per 24hr and cars for B1500, including full insurance._

Cookery classes Available at the Krabi Thai Cookery School, just off the Krabi–Ao Nang road (9am–1pm & 2–6pm; B1000 including transport; ⓣ075 695133, ⓦwww.krabidir.com/krthaicookery).

Dive centre Although there are dive centres at all the Krabi beaches, it's possible to organize trips and courses from Krabi town through the British-run Reefwatch Worldwide Dive Operator, 48 Thanon Utrakit (ⓣ075 632650, ⓦwww.reefwatchworldwide.com), a PADI Five-Star Instructor Development Centre. They charge B13,900 for the four-day Openwater course and run dive trips to local sites (see p.454) from B2900, generally in a longtail boat.

Hospitals Krabi Hospital is about 1km north of the town centre at 325 Thanon Utrakit (ⓣ075 611202) and also has dental facilities, but the better hospital is considered to be the private Muslim hospital, Jariyatham Ruampaet Hospital (ⓣ075 611223), which is about 3km north of town and has English-speaking staff.

Immigration office On Thanon Utrakit (Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm; ⓣ075 611097).

Internet access Available at nearly every Krabi guest house, and fast and efficiently at Krabi and Beyond on Maharat Soi 6. Catnet Internet terminals at the phone office on Thanon Utrakit.

Mail The GPO is on Thanon Utrakit. Poste restante should be addressed c/o GPO and can be collected Mon–Fri 8.30am–4.30pm, Sat 9am–noon.

Motorbike rental Through some guest houses and tour companies for about B250 per day.

Pharmacies There are several pharmacies, including on Thanon Utrakit and Maharat Soi 6, and a branch of Boots the Chemist inside Vogue Department Store on Thanon Maharat.

Police For all emergencies, call the tourist police on the free, 24hr phone line ⓣ1155, or contact the local branch of the tourist police in Ao Nang on ⓣ075 637208. Krabi police station is at the southern end of Thanon Utrakit ⓣ075 611222.

Telephones For international calls use the CAT phone office about 2km north of the town centre on Thanon Utrakit (Mon–Fri 8am–8pm, Sat & Sun 8.30am–4.30pm), which is easily reached on any songthaew heading up that road, or on foot.

Day-trips from Krabi town

With time on your hands you'll soon exhaust the possibilities in Krabi, but there are several trips to make out of town, in addition to the nearby beaches at Laem Phra Nang (Railay; p.437), Hat Nopparat Thara (see p.443), Ao Phang Nga (see p.424) and Ko Phi Phi (see p.453). Alternatively, you could join one of the numerous **organized tours** sold by every Krabi travel agent, for example a tour of four or five islands, which take in the reefs and beaches around Laem Phra Nang (about B700); a hike through the national park near Khlong Thom, home of the turquoise-feathered Gurney's pitta, a rare bird that's endemic to southern Thailand and southern Burma; a sea-canoeing trip around Ao Luk or Ao Thalen in Phang Nga bay (B800–2000; see p.427); or a visit to the botanical gardens of Than Bokkharani, near Ao Luk, whose grottoes and waterfalls are enclosed in a ring of lush forest (you can also visit these independently, by catching an Ao Luk songthaew from Krabi, which takes an hour, and then walking down to the gardens). Tour agencies sell the same basic itineraries, so prices are kept competitive.

You can also arrange private tours with the longtail boatmen at Tha Chao Fa, who charge B1000 per boat for a day-trip to Ko Poda or to Chicken Island, though you'll need your own snorkel.

The mangroves and Ko Klang

Longtail-boat tours of the **mangrove swamps** that clog the Krabi River estuary can be organized directly with the boatmen who hang around Krabi's two piers (B100 per person per hour, minimum three people) or through most tour operators (average B500/person for three hours). All mangrove tours give you a chance to get a close-up view of typical mangrove flora and fauna (see the colour section on Ao Phang Nga for more on mangroves), and most will stop off at a couple of riverside caves on the way. The most famous features on the usual mangrove itinerary are the twin limestone outcrops known as **Khao Kanab Nam**, which rise a hundred metres above the water from opposite sides of the Krabi River near the *Maritime Park and Spa Resort* and are so distinctive that they've become the symbol of Krabi. One of the twin karsts hides caves, which can be easily explored – many skeletons have been found here over the centuries, thought to be those of immigrants who got stranded by a flood before reaching the mainland.

Most of Krabi's longtail boatmen come from **KO KLANG**, the mangrove-encircled island that's clearly visible across the estuary from Tha Chao Fa and Tha Thara Park. On a two-hour mangrove tour you can choose to stop off on the island for a visit, or you can go there yourself, on one of the public longtail boats that shuttle across throughout the day, both from Tha Chao Fa (B10, or B50 to charter; 10min) and Tha Thara Park (B10, or B20 to charter; 3min). You can also stay there in Ban Ko Klang, as part of a **homestay** programme, which features batik-making, rice-farming and trips to local islands, and can be booked locally through the English-speaking coordinator Khun Supranee (Ⓣ089 475 0495) or in advance as part of a package with Tell Tale Travel (Ⓦwww.telltaletravel.co.uk). The predominantly Muslim island (in reality a peninsula but accessible only by water) is home to three small villages housing a total of around 4000 people, most of whom earn their living from tourism and fishing. The island is no great beauty but therein lies its charm, for it's entirely untouristed and offers the chance to experience typical southern-Thai life. The homestays have bicycles and motorbikes for rent or you can take your own over on the Tha Thara Park longtail; there's about 12 km of paved road on the island. You can swim off Ko Klang's long southwestern beach, though the shorefront is wild rather than picturesque; from this beach you also get an excellent view of the distinctive profiles of all the famous local islands – Laem Phra Nang (30 minutes' boat ride away), Ko Poda (45min), Bamboo Island, Ko Phi Phi (2hr) and Ko Jum – and any island boatman will take you out there for the same price as from Krabi town.

Wat Tham Seua and Khao Phanom Bencha

Beautifully set amid limestone cliffs about 10km northeast of Krabi, the tropical forest of **Wat Tham Seua** (Tiger Cave Temple) can be reached by taking one of the infrequent red songthaews from Thanon Maharat or Thanon Utrakit (20min; about B25) and then walking 2km down the signed track, or chartering one from town to the temple gates (B150). As Wat Tham Seua is a working monastery, visitors must wear respectable dress (no shorts or singlets for men or women), so bear this in mind before you leave town.

Wat Tham Seua's main **bot** – on the left under the cliff overhang – might come as a bit of a shock: alongside portraits of the abbot, a renowned teacher of Vipassana meditation, close-up photos of human entrails and internal organs are on display – reminders of the impermanence of the body. Any skulls and skeletons you might come across in the compound serve the same educational purpose. The most interesting part of Wat Tham Seua lies beyond the bot, reached by following the path past the nuns' quarters until you get to a couple of steep **staircases** up the 600-metre-high cliffside. The first staircase is long (1272 steps) and very steep, and takes about an hour to climb, but the vista from the summit is quite spectacular,

△ The goddess Kuan Im, Wat Tham Seua

affording fabulous views over the limestone outcrops and out to the islands beyond. There's a small shrine and a few monks' cells hidden among the trees at the top. The second staircase, next to the large statue of the Chinese fertility goddess Kuan Im, takes you on a less arduous route down into a deep dell encircled by high limestone walls. Here the monks have built themselves self-sufficient meditation cells, linked by paths through the lush ravine: if you continue along the main path you'll eventually find yourself back where you began, at the foot of the staircase. The valley is home to squirrels and monkeys as well as a pair of remarkable trees with overground **buttress roots** over 10m high.

With your own transport, you could combine a visit to Wat Tham Seua with a meander around the scenic back roads and a plunge into **Huay Toh Falls**, a five-tiered cascade that lies within **Khao Phanom Bencha National Park** (ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp; dawn till dusk; B200 entry), 25km north of Krabi. You can also **stay** in the Phanom Bencha area, about 10km north of Wat Tham Seua, in the tranquil garden cabins and tents of *Phanom Bencha Mountain Resort* (ⓣ081 958 0742, ⓦwww.phanombenchamountainresort.com; cabins ④–⑤, tents ②).

Susaan Hoi

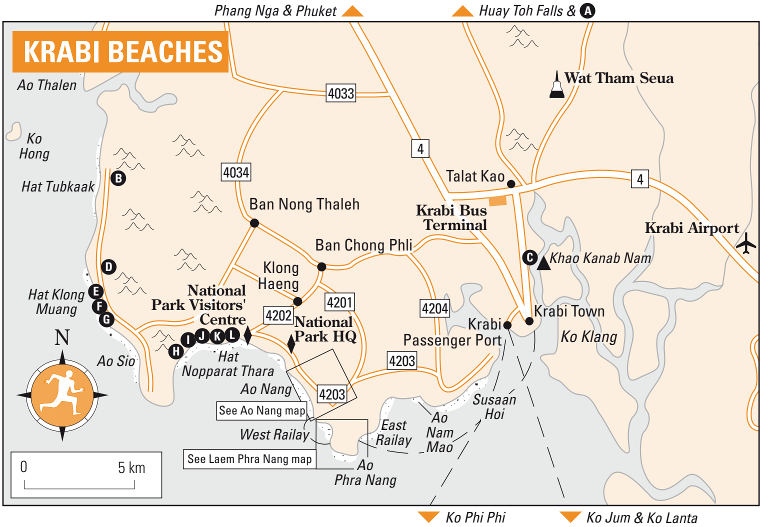
Thais make a big deal out of **Susaan Hoi** (Shell Cemetery), 17km west around the coast from Krabi, but it's hard to get very excited about a shoreline of metre-long forty-centimetre-thick beige-coloured rocks that could easily be mistaken for concrete slabs. Nevertheless, the facts of their formation are impressive: these stones are 75 million years old and made entirely from compressed shell fossils. You get a distant view of them from any longtail boat travelling between Krabi and Ao Phra Nang; for a closer look take any of the frequent Ao Nang-bound songthaews from Thanon Maharat or Thanon Utrakit (B40).

Krabi beaches

Although the mainland beach areas west of Krabi can't compete with the local islands for underwater life, the stunning headland of **Laem Phra Nang** is accessible only by boat, so staying on one of its four beaches (**Ao Phra Nang, West and East Railay and Ao Ton Sai**) can feel like being on an island, albeit a crowded and potentially rather claustrophobic one. In contrast, a road runs right along the **Ao Nang** beachfront, which has enabled a burgeoning resort to thrive around its rather unexceptional beach, while the next bay to the west, **Hat Nopparat Thara**, is long and unadulterated and has some appealingly solitary places to stay at its western end. **Klong Muang** is different again, secluded and quiet and catering almost exclusively to the guests of its top-end hotels. Swimming and snorkelling conditions deteriorate at all Krabi beaches during the rainy season from May to October, so prices at all accommodation drops by up to fifty percent for this period, and a few places close down for the duration.

Laem Phra Nang (Railay)

Seen from the close quarters of a longtail boat, the combination of sheer limestone cliffs, pure white sand and emerald waters at **LAEM PHRA NANG** is spectacular – and would be even more so without the hundreds of other admirers gathered on its beaches. Almost every centimetre of buildable land on the cape's two main beaches, East and West **Railay**, has now been taken over by bungalows, and development is creeping up the cliffsides and into the forest behind. But at least high-rises


KRABI BEACHES
Phang Nga & Phuket
Huay Toh Falls & A
Ao Thalen
Ko Hong
Hat Tubkaak
B
4033
4034
4
Wat Tham Seua
Talat Kao
Ban Nong Thaleh
Krabi Bus Terminal
Krabi Airport
Ban Chong Phli
C
Khao Kanab Nam
D
Klong Haeng
Hat Klong Muang
E
F
G
National Park Visitors' Centre
4201
4202
National Park HQ
4204
Krabi Town
Krabi Passenger Port
Ko Klang
N
Ao Sio
I J K L
H
Hat Nopparat Thara
Ao Nang
4203
See Ao Nang map
West Railay
East Railay
Ao Nam Mao
Susaan Hoi
See Laem Phra Nang map
Ao Phra Nang
Trang
0
5 km
Ko Phi Phi
Ko Jum & Ko Lanta

ACCOMMODATION

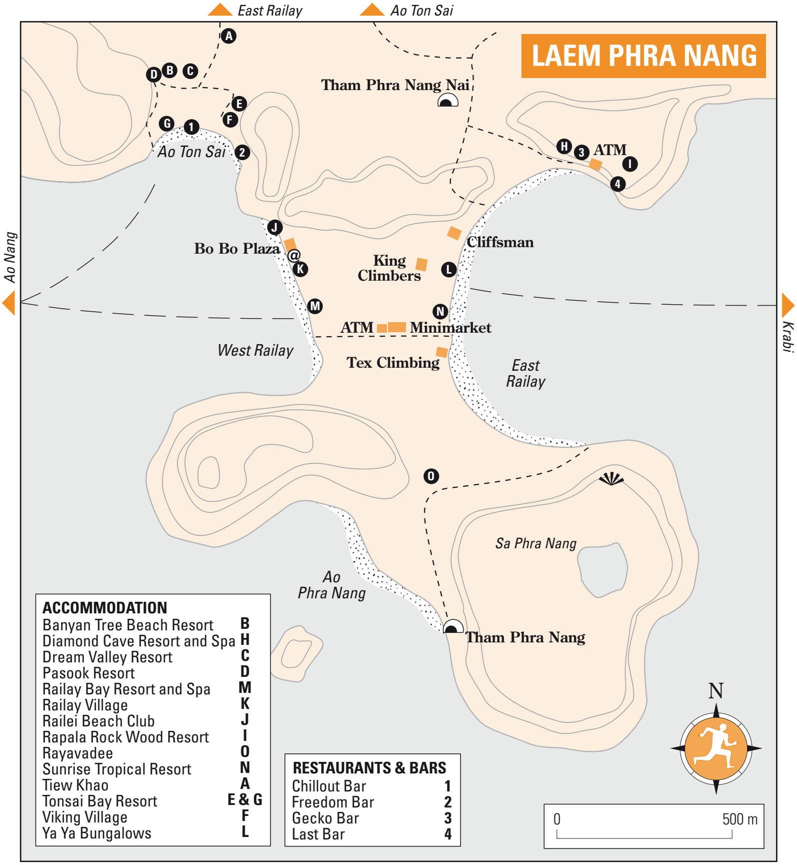
Andaman Holiday Resort	F	Long Beach Bungalow and Camp	I	Phanom Bencha Mountain Resort	A
Andaman Inn	L	Maritime Park and Spa Resort	C	Private Beach Resort	J
Emerald Bungalows	K	Nakamanda	E	Sheraton Krabi Beach Resort	G
Krabi Sands	D	PAN Beach	H	The Tubkaak Krabi	B

don't feature, and much of the construction is hidden among trees or set amid prettily landscaped gardens. The headland has four beaches within ten minutes' walk of each other: **Ao Phra Nang** graces the southwestern edge, and is flanked by **East and West Railay**; **Ao Ton Sai** is beyond West Railay, on the other side of a rocky promontory. The scene at Laem Phra Nang is laid-back, but by no means comatose; it's as popular with backpackers as it is with couples on short breaks, and the accommodation and entertainment facilities reflect this. It's also a major rock-climbing centre, both for beginners and experienced climbers. Even if you don't want to stay, it's worth coming for the day to gawp at the scenery and scramble down into the lushly vegetated area around the cape's enclosed lagoon.

The beaches

Set against a magnificent backdrop of cliffs and palms, diminutive **AO PHRA NANG** (aka **Hat Tham Phra Nang**) is the loveliest spot on the cape, attracting sunbathers to its luxuriously soft sand and snorkellers to the reefs some 200m offshore. Screened from the beach is just one luxury resort, the *Rayavadee*, with the sole means of direct access to Ao Phra Nang, but non-guests can walk there from East Railay in under ten minutes, following the walkway that winds alongside the resort's boundary, under the lip of the karst, to the beach.

The beach and cape are named after a princess (*phra nang* means "revered lady"), whom the local fisherfolk believe lives here and controls the fertility of the sea. If you walk past the entrance to **Tham Phra Nang** (Princess Cave), hollowed out of the huge karst outcrop at the eastern edge of the bay, you'll see a host of red-tipped wooden phalluses stacked as offerings to her, by way of insurance for large catches. The numerous passageways and rocks around the cave are fun to clamber over, but getting down into **Sa Phra Nang** (Princess Lagoon) is more of a challenge. Buried


LAEM PHRA NANG
East Railay
Ao Ton Sai
Tham Phra Nang Nai
Ao Ton Sai
ATM
Bo Bo Plaza
@
King Climbers
Cliffsman
ATM
Minimarket
Tex Climbing
West Railay
East Railay
Ao Nang
Krabi
Sa Phra Nang
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Tham Phra Nang
N
0
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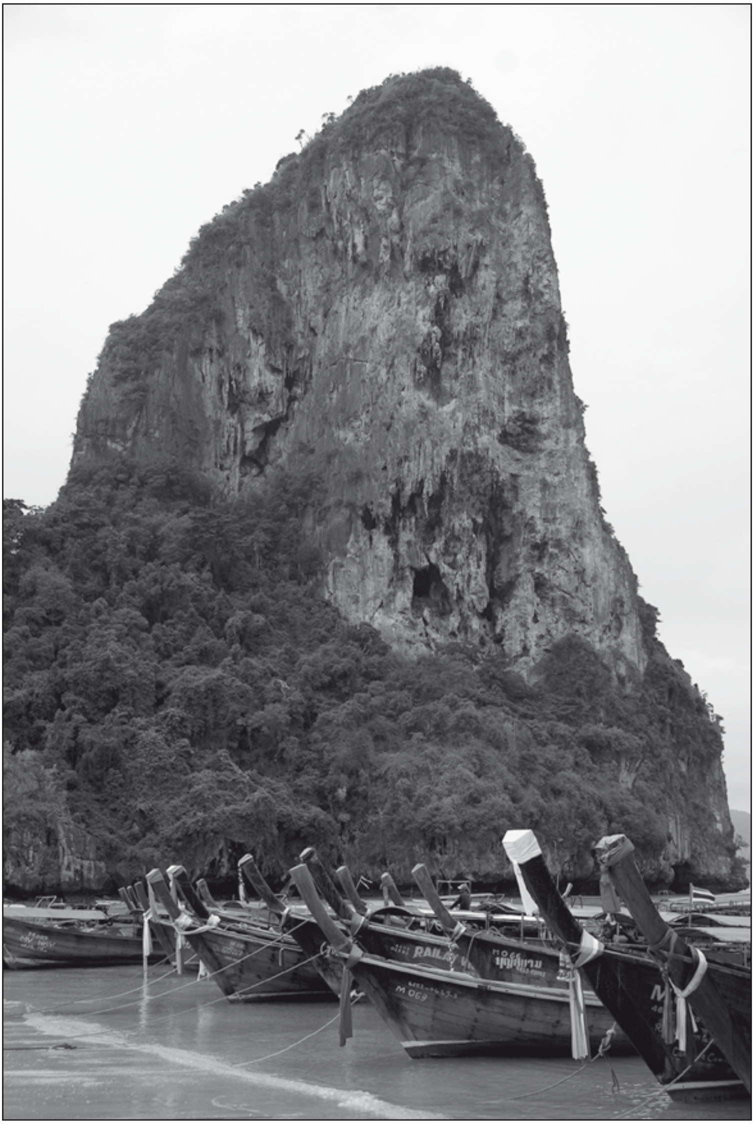
ACCOMMODATION
Banyan Tree Beach Resort B
Diamond Cave Resort and Spa H
Dream Valley Resort C
Pasook Resort D
Railay Bay Resort and Spa M
Railay Village K
Railei Beach Club J
Rapala Rock Wood Resort I
Rayavadee O
Sunrise Tropical Resort N
Tiew Khao A
Tonsai Bay Resort E & G
Viking Village F
Ya Ya Bungalows L
RESTAURANTS & BARS
Chillout Bar 1
Freedom Bar 2
Gecko Bar 3
Last Bar 4

deep inside the same rock, the lagoon is accessible only via a steep 45-minute descent that starts at the "resting spot" halfway along the walkway connecting the east edge of Ao Phra Nang with East Railay. After an initial ten-minute clamber, negotiated with the help of ropes, the path forks: go left for a panoramic view over the east and west bays of Railay, or right for the lagoon. (For the strong-armed, there's the third option of hauling yourself up ropes to the top of the cliff for a bird's-eye view.) Taking the right-hand fork, you'll pass through the tropical dell dubbed "big tree valley" before eventually descending to the murky lagoon.

Sometimes known as Sunset Beach, **WEST RAILAY** comes a close second to Ao Phra Nang, with similarly impressive karst scenery, crystal-clear water and a longer stretch of good sand. There's some shade here too, and you only have to walk a few hundred metres to get beyond the longtails and the beachfront diners' line of vision. It gets crowded though, with daytrippers from Ao Nang as well as beach-hungry refugees from East Railay and Ao Ton Sai.

The least attractive of the cape's beaches, **EAST RAILAY** (also sometimes known as Nam Mao, but not to be confused with the Ao Nam Mao proper, immediately to the east) is not suitable for swimming because of its fairly dense mangrove growth, a tide that goes out for miles and a bay that's busy with incoming longtails. Still, there's a greater concentration of less expensive bungalows here, and none is more than ten minutes' walk from the much cleaner sands of West Railay and Ao Phra Nang. To get to East Railay from Ao Phra Nang, follow the walkway from the eastern edge; from West Railay walk through the *Railay Bay* or *Railay Village* bungalow compounds.



△ West Railay, Laem Phra Nang

At low tide you can pick your way over the razor-sharp oyster rocks at the northern end of West Railay (beyond the *Railei Beach Club* compound) to reach **AO TON SAI**; at high tide you either need to swim or get a longtail. If coming by boat direct from Krabi, be prepared for a very muddy walk to shore at low tide, or a wade at high water. There's also an inland route between Ao Ton Sai and East Railay: simply follow the track past *Tiew Khao* bungalows, through the forest, over the hill and, about 20 minutes later it will bring you down to the northern end of East Railay. Ao Ton Sai is the travellers' beach, with a bigger choice of fairly low-budget accommodation than Railay and regular all-night beach parties hosted by some of the shorefront bars. Hardly any of the accommodation here has direct beach access as most of it is well hidden several hundred metres back from the shore, scattered within the remains of a forest. The beach itself is not one of Krabi's prettiest, prone to murk and littered with rocks that make it impossible to swim at low tide. But the karst-filled outlook is awesome and Ao Ton Sai's own orange-and-ochre-striped cliffs are equally fabulous confections, dripping with rocky curlicues, pennants and turrets that attract a lot of rock-climbers.

Climbing, kayaking and snorkelling

Given the topography, there's huge potential for **rock-climbing**, abseiling and caving at Laem Phra Nang. There are some seven hundred bolted sport-climbing routes on the cape, ranging in difficulty from 5a to 8c, and no shortage of places where you can rent equipment and hire guides and instructors. Some of the longest-established climbing outfits include: Cliffsman (ⓣ075 621768), on East Railay; King Climbers (ⓣ075 637125, ⓦwww.railay.com/railay/climbing/climbing_king_climbers.shtml), at *Ya Ya* on East Railay, Hot Rock (ⓣ075 621771, ⓦwww.railayadventure.com), in Bobo Plaza on West Railay, as well as on Ao Ton Sai; and Tex Climbing (ⓣ081 891 1528, ⓦwww.texrock.com), beyond *Sunrise Tropical* on East Railay. It's a good idea to check with other tourists before choosing a climbing guide, as operators' safety standards vary. All the climbing centres rent out equipment (B1000/day for two people) and offer a range of climbing **courses** and expeditions. A typical half-day introduction for novice climbers costs B800, a one-day climbing outing is B1500, and for B5000 you get a three-day course which should leave you experienced enough to strike out on your own. If you're already self-sufficient, you might want to get hold of the *Route Guide* to the Laem Phra Nang climbs, written by the guys at King Climbers and available from most of the climbing shops. For more information check out ⓦwww.simonfoley.com/climbing /krabi.htm and see Basics p.59.

Limestone cliffs and mangrove swamps also make great **kayaking** environments, and there are kayak rental outlets on all the beaches (B100–200 per hour). All the tour agents also offer kayaking tours of spectacular Ao Luk and Ko Hong in Phang Nga bay (see p.426) for B1200–1500, as well as **snorkelling trips** (from B450 including equipment) to the nearby islands of Ko Poda and Chicken Island (Hua Kwan); the boatmen do private four-island snorkelling trips for B1000/half-day or B1800/full day, and Railay Diving, in Bo Bo Plaza on West Railay and on Ao Ton Sai (ⓣ075 622592) do sunset snorkelling and dinner trips as well as **dive trips** to local reefs (see p.447) from B3600.

Practicalities

Laem Phra Nang is only accessible by **boat** from Krabi town, Ao Nang and Ko Phi Phi. Longtail boats to Laem Phra Nang depart from various spots along the **Krabi** riverfront (45min; B70 per person, minimum 8 people, or B700 when chartered), leaving throughout the day as soon as they fill up. Depending on the tide, all Krabi boats land on or off East Railay, so you'll probably have to wade; from East Railay it's easy to cut across to West Railay along any of the through-tracks. Krabi boats do run during the rainy season, but the waves make it a nerve-racking experience, so you're advised to go via Ao Nang instead. **Ao Nang** is much closer to Laem Phra Nang, and longtails run from the beachfront here to West Railay and Ao Ton Sai (10min; B60, or B100 after 7pm) all year round. Boats between Ao Ton Sai and West Railay cost B30. During high season there should also be daily services from Ao Nang via West Railay to **Ko Phi Phi** (2hr 30min), **Ko Lanta** (2hr 30min) and **Phuket** (3hr); if not, you'll need to transfer to Ao Nang yourself.

There are tour agencies and shops selling beach essentials on each beach, and you can **change money** at many bungalow operations, though rates can be up to ten percent lower than at the Krabi banks; you'll find ATMs at *Viewpoint Bungalows* on East Railay and at the minimarket behind *Railay Bay*. There's **Internet access** and overseas phone services at *Railay Village*, *Ya Ya* and *Ton Sai Bay Resort*, and **bookshops** stocked with new and second-hand books in BoBo Plaza on West Railay and behind *Viking Village* on Ao Ton Sai.

Accommodation, eating and drinking

Accommodation on the Railay beaches tends to be more expensive and less good value than equivalent options on the mainland. Despite this, it's often hard to get a room on spec at East or West Railay, though you should have more luck on Ao Ton Sai. Prices listed below are for high season, but rates can drop up to fifty percent from May to October and are often subject to a surcharge for the Christmas-New Year fortnight.

Nearly all the bungalow operations have **restaurants**, but don't expect *haute cuisine* – or bargain prices. There's no shortage of relaxed beachfront **bars** – think mellow tunes, cushions on the beach and fire juggling – including *Gecko Bar* and the famously chilled-out *Last Bar*, both near *Diamond Cave Bungalows* on East Railay, but the main party beach is Ao Ton Sai, where the shoreside *Freedom Bar* and *Chillout Bar* both hold regular all-night events, plus monthly full-moon **parties.** Though not as hectic, or large, as the famous Ko Pha Ngan versions, these draw lively crowds and there's boat transport from West Railay and Ao Nang through the night.

Ao Phra Nang

Rayavadee ⓣ075 620740, ⓦwww.rayavadee.com. Set in an extensive, beautifully landscaped compound – with resident monkeys – bordering three beaches, this is the only place with direct access to Ao Phra Nang. It's an exclusive resort comprising an unobtrusively designed small village of supremely elegant two-storey spiral-shaped pavilions costing a staggering B22,000 a night. The lack of beachfront accommodation is more than compensated for by a swimming pool with sea view. ⑨

West Railay

Railay Bay Resort and Spa ⓣ075 622570, ⓦwww.krabi-railaybay.com. A huge range of accommodation on a stretch of land that runs down to both East and West Railay, with a swimming pool and spa centre on site. All rooms have air-con, TV, mini-bar and hot water: the cheapest are in small, old-style but spruce bungalows and there are also some comfortable, more modern rooms in a two-storey hotel block. Bungalows ⑦–⑧, hotel ⑧

Railei Beach Club ⓣ075 622582, ⓦwww.raileibeachclub.com. Exclusive, secluded, garden-haven compound of nineteen charming fan-cooled private houses, built of wood in idiosyncratic Thai style and rented out by their owners. One- two- and three-bed houses are available, but must be booked several months in advance. Nearly all houses have kitchen facilities and offer a housekeeping service, and there's also a club house in the compound. ⑥–⑨

Railay Village ⓣ075 622578, ⓦwww.railay.com/railay/accommodation/railay_village.shtml. Attractive fan and air-con bungalows occupying very pretty tropical gardens in between the two beaches, with nowhere more than 300m from the West Railay shore. Fills up fast as it's good value considering the competition. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑦–⑧

East Railay

Diamond Cave Resort and Spa ☎ 075 622589, ⓦ www.diamondcave-railay.com. Set up high above the beach, impressively located beside several karsts, including Diamond Cave itself, this place has 95 rooms in all, so there's plenty of choice, even if it's all quite tightly packed. Rooms are plainly but comfortably furnished, and come in various permutations, most of them fan or air-con bungalows, with the poshest being in low-rise hotel-style buildings. Also has a small swimming pool. Fan ⑤–⑥, air-con ⑦–⑧

Rapala Rock Wood Resort ☎ 075 622586. A popular place, with a travellers' vibe, this is the best of the cheaper options on Railay. Climb a steep flight of stairs to reach the 31 nice, rough-hewn timber huts, set in rows around a scruffy garden high above the beach, with some enjoying dramatic karst views from their verandas. All bungalows have mattress-beds, screens or mosquito nets, and decent bathrooms; the pricier ones are a bit bigger and nearer the front. There's also a tiny hot-tub-sized pool up here, a lounging area on a deck that juts out into the treetops, and a restaurant that serves Indian food. ③–④

Sunrise Tropical Resort ☎ 075 622599, ⓦ www.sunrisetropical.com. The most stylish of the affordable hotels on the cape offers just 28 elegantly designed air-con bungalows, all with Thai furnishings and generously spacious living areas, set around a landscaped tropical garden with a small pool. The only drawback is its location – on the lesser, mangrove-filled, eastern beach. ⑧–⑨

Ya Ya Bungalows ☎ 075 622593. This idiosyncratic place is built almost entirely of wood, with most of the 70 fan and air-con rooms contained in a series of sturdy, quite well-designed, three-storey wooden towers, and all of them having verandas and en-suite bathrooms. Soundproofing is not great however. The price mainly depends on room size. Fan ④–⑥, air-con ⑦

Ao Ton Sai

Banyan Tree Beach Resort ☎ 075 621684. Built in a line under the trees, the 35 bungalows come in two types: standard bamboo and wooden versions with mosquito nets and bathrooms, or nicer mint-green clapboard chalets with comfortable beds and good bathrooms. ②–④

Dream Valley Resort ☎ 075 622583, ⓦ www.krabidir.com/dreamvalresort. The close on sixty bungalows here are ranged discreetly amongst the trees, offering a range of accommodation from split-bamboo huts with fan and bathroom through to air-conditioned cabins. Fan ④–⑤ Air-con ⑤

Pasook Resort ☎ 089 649 8491. This little place, squeezed right under the karst at a peaceful corner near the western end of the path, offers two styles of bungalow, all of them with fan and bathroom. Cheapest are the orange-painted breezeblock bungalows, but the wooden ones are more appealing and quite spacious. ③–④

Tiew Khao ☎ 075 621664. Veer off the main inland path to venture deeper into the forest and after about 250m you reach *Tiew Khao*'s collection of rudimentary bamboo huts ranged up the hillside beside the track. They're the cheapest on Ao Ton Sai: all of them share bathrooms and facilities comprise nothing more than a mattress and a veranda. ②

Tonsai Bay Resort ☎ 075 622584, ⓦ www.tonsaibayresort.com. With its large, widely spaced and beautifully appointed air-con bungalows, each one boasting huge glass windows and big decks from which to soak up the pretty location in a grove of trees about 200m back from the shore, this is the plushest and most stylish place on Ao Ton Sai. The fan options nearer the beach are overpriced and within earshot of the all-night *Freedom Bar*. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑦

Viking Village ☎ 081 970 4037. Popular, laid-back option very close to the shore, with a dozen primitive bamboo huts, with fan and mozzie nets, and with or without private bathrooms. Shared bathroom ③, en suite ④

Ao Nang and Hat Nopparat Thara

AO NANG (sometimes confusingly signed as Ao Phra Nang), a couple of bays further north up the coast from Laem Phra Nang, is a busy, continually expanding, rather faceless mainland resort that mainly caters for mid-market and package-holiday tourists, the majority of whom come from Scandinavia. Although it lacks Laem Phra Nang's fine beaches, some people find Ao Nang a less claustrophobic place than the cape, and there's a much greater choice of restaurants and bars, plus a wealth of dive shops, tour operators and other typical resort facilities. The best stretch of shore for swimming and sunbathing is about 1km southeast of the commercial centre, accessed via a walkway from *Phra Nang Inn*. Walk past the circular villas at *Golden Beach* and along the paved walkway to *The Last Café*, where the beach is backed by a towering karst and is sufficiently removed from the roar of incoming longtails. En route you can take your pick of two-dozen massage huts set out under the trees, several of which advertise themselves as Wat Pho-trained, or as specialists in remedial treatments; the standard price is B200 per hour. Around a small headland beyond *The Last Café* lies **Ao Phai Plong**, another small bay that's accessible by swimming, wading or kayak but is dominated by a single posh hotel. Alternatively, it's an impressive ten-minute boat ride from the Ao Nang shore to the beaches of Laem Phra Nang (see p.436).

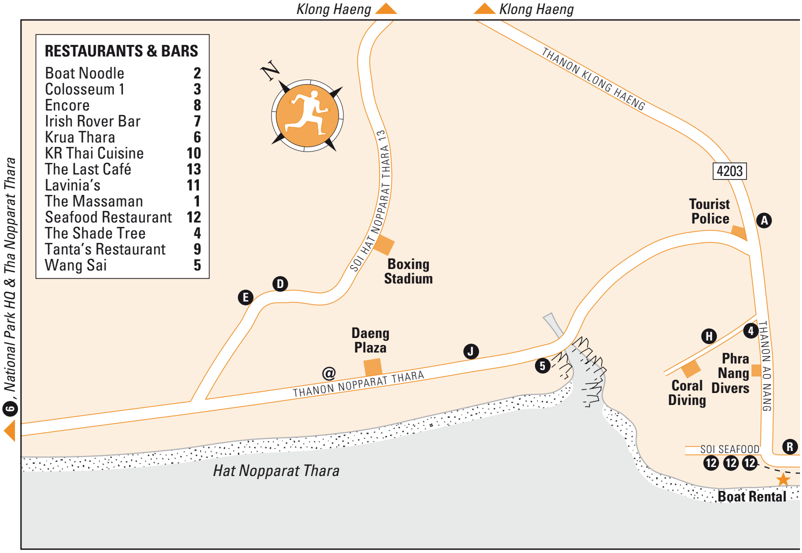
Adjacent **HAT NOPPARAT THARA**, part of which comes under the protection of the national marine park that also encompasses Ko Phi Phi, is effectively two beaches, divided by a khlong. With inland development moving fast, the **eastern beach,** a two-kilometre-long stretch of sand that begins about 1km northwest of *Krabi Resort*, is fast becoming Ao Nang's western suburb. Transport into Ao Nang is frequent, and it's easily reached on foot, so the restaurants, bars and shops of Ao Nang are shared between the two accommodation centres. The eastern beach itself is long and uncrowded, though the road runs unscreened alongside. At low tide it's almost impossible to swim here, but the sands are enlivened by thousands of starfish and hermit crabs, and from near the khlong you can walk out to the small offshore island. The **National Park visitor centre** is located beside the khlong and its sheltered marina and jetty, Tha Nopparat Thara, which is the departure point for Ao Nang ferry services to Phuket, Phi Phi and Ko Lanta, as well as for longtails across the khlong to Hat Nopparat Thara's western beach. The visitor centre's car park has several locally popular seafood restaurants, and Krabi residents also like to picnic under the shorefront trees here. The National Park headquarters and accommodation are a few hundred metres away at the western end of the eastern beach's beachfront road.

Sometimes known as **Hat Ton Son**, the **western beach**, across on the other side of the khlong and accessible only via longtail from Tha Nopparat Thara, has a quite different atmosphere from its eastern counterpart: just five bungalow operations share its long swathe of peaceful casuarina- and palm-shaded shoreline, making it a great place to escape the crowds and commerce of other Krabi beaches. The views of the karst islands are magnificent – and you can walk to some of the nearer ones at low tide, though swimming here is just as tide-dependent as on central and eastern Hat Nopparat Thara. Some of the bungalow outfits can arrange snorkelling trips to nearby islands.

Arrival, transport and information

For details on arriving at **Krabi airport**, about 35km from Ao Nang, see p.429; taxis from the airport to Ao Nang and Hat Nopparat Thara take about 30 minutes and cost B600. All other long-distance journeys to Ao Nang involve going via Krabi, 22km east, from where **songthaews** to Ao Nang run regularly throughout the day, taking about 45 minutes (every 10min 6am–6.30pm; B30; every 30min 6.30pm–10.30pm; B50); some of these songthaews start at Krabi bus terminal. During the day, all Krabi–Ao Nang songthaews go via the national park visitor centre (for the harbour and boats to the western beach) and all travel the length of eastern Hat Nopparat Thara as well. The fare is B30 from Krabi (30min) or B10–20 from Ao Nang (10–15min); the 6.30–10.30pm Krabi–Ao Nang service takes a different route and doesn't pass any part of Hat Nopparat Thara. Taxis between Krabi and Ao Nang cost about B400.

Longtails from Tha Hat Nopparat Thara leave for the **western beach** when full and will drop you beside the closest set of bungalows, *Andaman Inn* (B20), from where you can walk to the accommodation of your choice; at high tide they'll take you further up the beach if asked (B40). Although there is a 4WD track to the


RESTAURANTS & BARS
Boat Noodle 2
Colosseum 1 3
Encore 8
Irish Rover Bar 7
Krua Thara 6
KR Thai Cuisine 10
The Last Café 13
Lavinia's 11
The Massaman 1
Seafood Restaurant 12
The Shade Tree 4
Tanta's Restaurant 9
Wang Sai 5
Klong Haeng
Klong Haeng
THANON KLONG HAENG
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Tourist Police
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SOI HAT NOPPARAT THARA 13
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Hat Nopparat Thara
SOI SEAFOOD
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12
Boat Rental

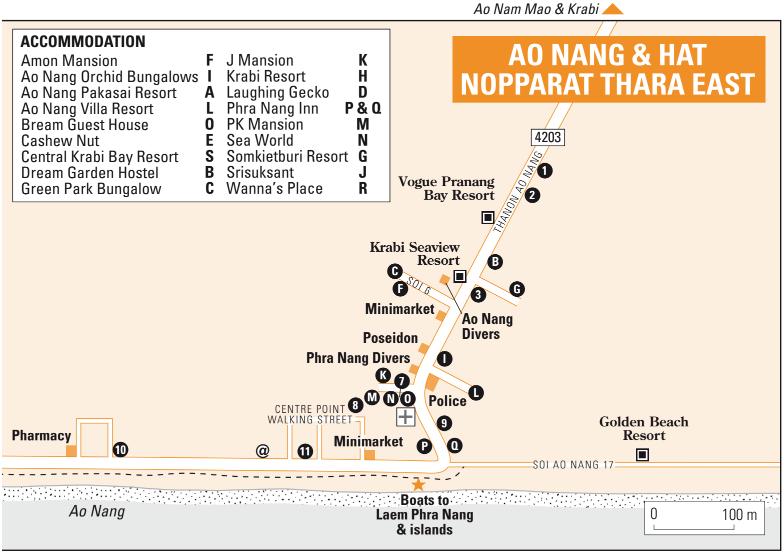
western beach, it's only used by experienced bikers and pick-up trucks. Frequent longtail boats shuttle back and forth from Ao Nang to West Railay and Ao Ton Sai on **Laem Phra Nang** (10min; B60, or B100 after dark), while from November to May daily boats run to **Ko Phi Phi Don** (2hr 30min), **Ko Lanta** (2hr 30min) and **Phuket** (3hr) from the harbour at Hat Nopparat Thara; transfers from Ao Nang hotels are included in the ticket price.

There's still a lack of **street-signing** and numbering in this continually evolving resort, but the main road through Ao Nang is officially known as Thanon Ao Nang, with a few of its side roads distinguished as numbered sois. Similarly, the main beachfront road along eastern Hat Nopparat Thara is Thanon Nopparat Thara, with some numbered sois.

Tour operators and touts throughout the resort hire **motorbikes** (B150–250/24hr) and jeeps (B1200/day) and there's a Budget **car** rental agent inside *Ao Nang Villa* on Ao Nang's beachfront (Ⓣ075 637270, Ⓦwww.budget.co.th). Several shops rent out decent bicycles for B100–250/24 hour and **kayaks** are available from a few outlets in town and from the beach in front of *The Last Fisherman Café* (B100–150/hr).

Ao Nang's shops and businesses can meet most travellers' requirements, with several official **money exchange** counters, lots of **Internet** centres, several minimarkets and pharmacies, a proliferation of beachwear stalls, handicraft shops, DVD and CD stalls, numerous tour operators, and the inevitable tailors' shops. The local **tourist police** are based near the *Ao Nang Pakasai Resort* (Ⓣ075 637208) and there's a medical and dental **clinic** in front of *Bream* (Mon–Fri 5–8pm, Sat & Sun 2–6pm). Krabi Thai Cookery School, just off the Ao Nang–Krabi road, runs morning and afternoon **cooking courses** (9am–1pm & 2–6pm; B1000 including transport; Ⓣ075 695133, Ⓦwww.krabidir.com/krthaicookery).

The free monthly **tourist magazine**, *Flyer* (Ⓦwww.yourkrabi.com), is a good source of information on Ao Nang and the Krabi area and is available from some hotels and restaurants.


Ao Nam Mao & Krabi
AO NANG & HAT NOPPARAT THARA EAST
ACCOMMODATION
Amon Mansion F
Ao Nang Orchid Bungalows I
Ao Nang Pakasai Resort A
Ao Nang Villa Resort L
Bream Guest House O
Cashew Nut E
Central Krabi Bay Resort S
Dream Garden Hostel B
Green Park Bungalow C
J Mansion K
Krabi Resort H
Laughing Gecko D
Phra Nang Inn P & Q
PK Mansion M
Sea World N
Somkietburi Resort G
Srisuksant J
Wanna's Place R
4203
THANON AO NANG
Vogue Pranang Bay Resort
Krabi Seaview Resort
SOI 6
Minimarket
Ao Nang Divers
Poseidon
Phra Nang Divers
Police
CENTRE POINT WALKING STREET
Minimarket
Pharmacy
@
Golden Beach Resort
SOI AO NANG 17
⑬, Ⓢ & Ao Phai Plong
Ao Nang
Boats to Laem Phra Nang & islands
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Accommodation

Ultra-low-budget **accommodation** is almost nonexistent in Ao Nang, and some of the mid-priced places are set within rather cramped confines. Room standards are good, however, and there are decent deals to be had at the upper end of the market if you book online (see Basics p.49 for some online booking agents). Hat Nopparat Thara east has a couple of enticing budget options, but you'll have to head out to Hat Nopparat Thara west to find the archetypal beach bungalow, most of which have electricity in the evenings only and some of which close up for the rainy season from May to October. For locations of accommodation on Hat Nopparat Thara west, see the map on p.437. It's also possible to stay at **national park bungalows** at the west end of Thanon Nopparat Thara beside the National Park headquarters (☎075 637200, Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th/National_park.asp); these are mostly designed for groups of eight (B4000), though there are a couple of doubles (⑤); you can also rent tents (②–③), but the campsite is close to the road.

Ao Nang

Inexpensive and moderate

Amon Mansion Soi Ao Nang 6 ☎075 637695. All 20 rooms in this small, four-storey, family-run hotel have air-con, TV, hot water and a balcony, making the cheapest ones especially good-value. Price depends on the size of the room. Fills up fast so call ahead. ⑤–⑥

Ao Nang Orchid Bungalows Off Thanon Ao Nang ☎075 637697, Ⓦwww.krabidir.com/orchidbungalows. A reasonable, lower-mid-range place whose 20 or so bungalows are ranged around an attractive garden full of birds that's set back from the main road, a few minutes' walk from the sea. Interiors are plain but practically appointed and verandas enable you to make the most of the garden. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑥–⑦

Bream Guest House Off Thanon Ao Nang ☎075 637555. Much sought-after urban-style guest house offering some of the cheapest rooms in the resort, all with shared bathroom. ②

Dream Garden Hostel Off Thanon Ao Nang ☎075 637338, Ⓦwww.krabidir.com/dreamgardenhostel. Squashed into a narrow strip behind a shopfront, this place offers two storeys of very good fan and air-con rooms, all with TV and hot water, the only drawback being the wall view (partly obscured by plants). Upstairs rooms are brighter. ⑥

Green Park Bungalow Soi Ao Nang 6 ⓣ075 637300. Friendly, family-run place offering a range of well-furnished, en-suite fan bungalows within a shady grove of trees just off the main drag. ④

J Mansion Off Thanon Ao Nang ⓣ075 695128, ⓦwww.krabidir.com/j_mansion. Four-storey travellers' hotel whose very good rooms are extremely popular and must be booked ahead. They're all large, air-con and have satellite TV and high-level views, some of which extend to the green-clad karsts behind. The rooftop terrace also has a panoramic outlook. ⑥

PK Mansion Off Thanon Ao Nang ⓣ075 637431, ⓦkrabidir.com/pkmansion. Even cheaper than its neighbours on the backpackers' soi, this place has fairly grim bottom-range cell-like rooms with shared bathrooms and windows onto a passageway wall, but also offers much better en-suite options in the main building, some of them with balconies, karst views and air-con. ②–⑥

Sea World Off Thanon Ao Nang ⓣ075 637388, ⓔseaworld_aonang@hotmail.com. Considering the competition, rooms here are well priced as they all have a bathroom, a balcony and the choice of fan or air-con; some also enjoy good views, mostly green ones to the karsts inland, though a few look towards the sea. There's Internet access downstairs. It's very popular, so try to reserve ahead. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑥

Expensive

Ao Nang Pakasai Resort Thanon Klong Haeng ⓣ075 637777, ⓦwww.pakasai.com. The low-rise accommodation wings at this smallish, 74-room, upmarket hotel are staggered steeply up the hillside amidst profuse tropical gardens, though views of the bay are mostly blocked by neighbouring developments. The rooms are beautifully furnished and there's a scenically located rooftop swimming pool, a kids' pool, an attractive spa, and bicycle hire. ⑨

Ao Nang Villa Resort 113 Thanon Ao Nang ⓣ075 637270, ⓦwww.aonangvilla.com. A very popular hotel whose grounds run down to the beachfront walkway. The 157 upscale, air-con rooms are contained within several low-rise wings, a few of them enjoying a sea view, but most overlooking the garden or the bigger of the resort's two pools. ⑧–⑨

Central Krabi Bay Resort Ao Phai Plong ⓣ075 637789, ⓦwww.centralhotelsresorts.com. With the sandy bay of Ao Phai Plong all to itself, this is a secluded option just a few minutes by longtail boat from the facilities of Ao Nang proper. All rooms in the multistoreyed hotel buildings and stand-alone villas have sea views, interiors are modern and there's a big pool and a spa. ⑨

Krabi Resort Ao Nang ⓣ075 637030, ⓦwww.kraburesort.net. Set in a huge tropical garden that runs right down to the nicest, western end of Ao Nang beach, this is the oldest resort in Ao Nang, and one of the more old-fashioned. Air-con cottages are staggered in rows back from the shoreline and are plain and very old-style considering the price, though it's about the only place in central Ao Nang where you have the sea right on your doorstep. Rooms in the main, low-rise building are a little more modern. Also has a big pool and the Coral Diving Centre (see p.447) on site. ⑧–⑨

Phra Nang Inn Thanon Ao Nang ⓣ075 637130, ⓦwww.phrananginn.com. This timber-clad hotel, built in two wings on either side of the road and within a few metres of the sea, looks quaint from the outside, but the interiors have a contemporary feel and plenty of character. The comfortable air-con rooms are painted in bold, modern colours, tastefully furnished and attached to funky bathrooms. The best rooms overlook one of the hotel's three pools (one of which is for kids); there's also a spa and a recreation room. ⑧–⑨

Somkietburi Resort Thanon Thanon Ao Nang ⓣ075 637990, ⓦwww.somkietburi.com. Guests here enjoy one of the most delightful settings in Ao Nang, with rooms and swimming pools surrounded by a feral, jungle-style garden that's full of hanging vines and lotus ponds. Rooms are perfectly pleasant but nothing special; all have air-con and TV, and there's a spa. ⑧

Wanna's Place and Andaman Sunset Resort 31 Thanon Ao Nang ⓣ075 637484, ⓦwww.wannasplace.com. This two-in-one operation is the most affordable of the few beachfront places, with 47 air-con rooms in a low-rise sea-view hotel block and in bungalows ranged up the steep hill behind. The rooms are all of a good standard, the place is well run, and there's a small swimming pool. It's very popular so reserve ahead. ⑦

Hat Nopparat Thara east

Cashew Nut Soi Hat Nopparat Thara 13 ⓣ075 637560. Twenty-two good, sturdy en-suite brick and concrete bungalows with fan or air-con ranged around a peaceful garden full of cashew trees. Price depends on the size. Fan ②–③, air-con ⑤

Laughing Gecko Soi Hat Nopparat Thara 13 ⓣ075 695115, ⓦwww.laughinggeckothailand.com. Perhaps the last of the old-style bungalows left in the Ao Nang area, this is an exceptionally traveller-friendly haven that's run by a Thai-Canadian couple who cultivate an atmosphere of easy-going hospitality. Choose from a range of simple bamboo huts set around a garden dotted with cashew trees: the cheapest beds are in a nine-person dorm (B120), or there are private rooms with shared bathrooms, en-suite huts with platform beds and mosquito nets, and en-suite family bamboo houses comprising three rooms for five people plus a seating area. Also has Internet access and hosts nightly all-you-can-eat Thai buffets for B120–150, with live music. Shared bathroom ②, en suite ②–③, family house ④

Srisuksant 145 Thanon Nopparat Thara, near the Ao Nang end ⓣ075 638002, ⓦwww.srisuksantresort.com. Despite being right beside the road, with the priciest rooms having traffic-view balconies, this place is very popular, both because the price is good for such well-furnished air-con rooms – and because it's also just over the road from the beach and a five-minute walk to the edge of central Ao Nang. It also has two small pools. ⑦

Hat Nopparat Thara west

Andaman Inn 100m west of the khlong ⓣ081 956 1173, ⓔmildbungalow@yahoo.com. The most commercial option on the western beach, with a range of old- and new-style huts, all of them en suite and with fans. Does day-trips and snorkelling tours. Closes May to early Sept. ②–④

Emerald Bungalows Next to Andaman Inn ⓣ081 956 2566, ⓦder-workshop.de/emerald/emerald-homepage.html. There's some very comfortable accommodation here, in big, brightly painted and stylishly furnished en-suite wooden bungalows, all with sea views, large decks, and either fan or air-con. Also has a good restaurant and a bar. Usually closed May–Aug, but phone to check. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑦

Long Beach Bungalow and Camp ⓣ087 275 0949. Laid-back outfit (so laid-back that it's sometimes staffed, sometimes not) whose simple bamboo huts all come with platform bed and mosquito net; some also have private bathrooms. You can also rent tents here. The owner organizes three-day fishing camps to Bamboo Island. Should be open all year. Tents ①, bungalows ②

PAN Beach At the westernmost end of the beach, about 700m walk from the khlong ⓣ081 803 4849, ⓦwww.panbeach.com. Ten sturdy, simply furnished wooden bungalows, each with screened windows and bathroom, set just back from the shore. Also has kayaks for rent. In low season, call to check whether it's open. ③

Private Beach Resort Next to Emerald ⓣ081 425 9686, ⓦwww.privatebeachresort.net. There are just nine bungalows in a row here, each one tastefully furnished with elegant lamps, cushions and drapes, and designed with big windows and verandas. Choose to activate the air-con or not. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑦

Diving, snorkelling and kayaking

Ao Nang is Krabi's main centre for **dive shops**, with a dozen or more outlets, the most reputable of which include Ao Nang Divers at *Krabi Seaview* (ⓣ075 637242, ⓦwww.aonang-divers.com), German-UK-run Coral Diving at *Krabi Resort* (ⓣ075 637662, ⓦwww.coral-diving.com), Phra Nang Divers (ⓣ075 637064, ⓦwww.pndivers.com), and Poseidon (ⓣ075 637263, ⓦwww.poseidon-krabi.com). All these dive operators stick to a price agreement and charge the same rates, and most offer the same programmes. Diving with Ao Nang operators is possible year-round, with some dive staff claiming that off-season diving is more rewarding, not least because the sites are much less crowded. Most one-day **dive trips** head for the area round Ko Phi Phi (see pp.454–55) and include dives at Shark Point and the "King Cruiser" wreck dive (see p.409 for descriptions) for B2900 including two tanks; the Ko Ha island group, near Ko Lanta, is also popular and costs about the same (see p.468). Two dives in the Ao Nang area – at Ko Poda and Ko Yawasam – average B2500, or B2200 (B1400 for snorkellers) if you opt to go in a longtail rather than a dive boat. PADI dive courses start at B4500 for the introductory Discover Scuba day, or B13,900 for the Openwater. The nearest **recompression chambers** are on Phuket (see p.408); check to see that your dive operator is insured to use one of them. See Basics p.57 for general information on diving in Thailand.

It's quite common to arrange your own **snorkelling trips** with the longtail boatmen who congregate on the Ao Nang beachfront: a typical price would be B300 per person (minimum five people) for a four- or five-hour snorkelling trip to either

△ The view from Ao Nang

Ko Poda or Chicken Island, or B2000 for a whole boat to Ko Hong. Alternatively, all Ao Nang tour agents sell snorkelling and swimming day-trips such as those advertised as “four-island” tours. Most dive shops rent mask, snorkel and fins for about B150 the set. It’s also possible to arrange an all-inclusive **longtail boat tour** around Krabi’s islands and beaches: Australian-Thai-run Krabi Island Tours offers various tailor-made programmes that take in local islands as well as Ko Phi Phi, Ko Jum and Ao Luk and feature snorkelling, kayaking, fishing and camping or local accommodation (Ⓣ087 885 1125, Ⓦwww.krabi-island-tours.com; ten-day trips for B18,000 per person).

All tour agents in Ao Nang sell **kayaking** expeditions around the spectacular limestone karsts, mangrove swamps and caves of Ko Hong, Ao Luk and Ao Thalen in Phang Nga bay (described on p.424). Some outlets also rent kayaks at B100–150 per hour. Alternatively, you can simply paddle yourself across to West Railay on Laem Phra Nang, which takes about an hour: outlets all along Ao Nang beach rent kayaks for B100–200 per hour.

Eating, drinking and entertainment

Seafood is Ao Nang’s best suit, and one of the best places to enjoy it is on so-called Soi Seafood, off the western end of Ao Nang’s beachfront road, where a string of half a dozen **restaurants** serve well-priced fish dishes and fresh seafood by weight and offer uninterrupted views of the waves from their tables on decks above the sand; sunset is an especially popular time to dine here. Locals prefer less formal sea-view dining: buying fried chicken from the streetside stalls on Hat Nopparat Tara and eating it on **mats** under the shorefront trees. Ao Nang has a big Muslim population and as dusk falls handcarts selling the Muslim **roti** pancakes pop up all over the resort, particularly on the stretch of road between *Phra Nang Inn* and *Bream*: choose from a selection of sweet fillings including condensed milk, banana or chocolate.

The **bar** scene in Ao Nang is mainly focused around the **Ao Nang Centerpoint Walking Street**, a U-shaped passageway that runs behind the beachfront shops and is packed with tiny bars, each of them comprising just a few tables, a flirty bartender or two, plus sports TV and perhaps a pool table.

The *muay thai* **boxing** stadium behind Hat Nopparat Thara, 2km west out of Ao Nang, near the *Laughing Gecko* guest house on Soi Nopparat Thara 13, stages regular bouts in high season (tickets B600–1000); check local flyers for details.

Boat Noodle Thanon Ao Nang. Locals eat here because food is very cheap: the boat noodle soups (*kway tiaw reua*) – so called because these dark, pungent broths were originally served from hawker boats that paddled around the canals of central Thailand – are made with beef, chicken or pork and cost a bargain (for Ao Nang at least) B10–30. Daily 10am–5pm.

Colosseum 1 Thanon Ao Nang. The attraction here is that dishes are made with organic produce grown in the nearby Phanom Bencha hills and in northern Thailand. The menu features Thai curries (B70–100) and soups – served with a choice of jasmine, brown or black rice – as well as lasagnes (B240), pasta dishes, pizzas and ice creams, plus specials and imported wines. Daily 6–11pm.

Encore Ao Nang Centerpoint Walking Street. Nightly live music from 10pm – and the pool table – draws decent-sized crowds to this bar decorated with pictures of rock stars. Daily 11am–1am.

Irish Rover Bar Off Thanon Ao Nang. A little piece of home In the backpackers' soi – bangers and mash, roast dinners, draught Guinness and sports TV – so it's hugely popular with travellers. Daily 10am–1am.

Krua Thara National Park visitors' centre car park, near the barrier, Hat Nopparat Thara. Hugely popular with locals and visiting Thais for its fresh seafood and shellfish (B60–180). Daily 11am–9pm.

KR Thai Cuisine Beachfront road, Ao Nang. Low-key but popular tourist café that serves a huge, well-priced menu (B60–180) of everything from stir-fries to yellow, green and *matsaman* curries, plus seafood, a decent vegetarian selection and cocktails. Daily 10am–10pm.

The Last Café Soi Ao Nang 17. Situated beneath a towering karst at the far eastern end of the beach, this is a perfect, peaceful spot on Ao Nang's prettiest sands. Tables are set under the trees just back from the shore and the menu runs from rice-based dishes (B60) and soups through fruit shakes and home-made cakes. To get there, simply follow Soi Ao Nang 17 from *Phra Nang Inn* as far as you can go, passing *The Last Fisherman Bar* and massage huts en route – about 1km in all. Daily 7am–7pm.

Lavinia's Beachfront road, Ao Nang. Choose from over twenty thin-crust pizzas (B160–200) or a variety of sandwiches made with ciabatta or dark bread. Also specializes in pasta and home-made ice cream, and has a decent selection of imported wines. Daily 11am–11pm.

The Massaman Thanon Ao Nang. Tiny Thai-food place whose signature dish is chicken fillet massaman, a Muslim-style curry (B120). Most of their other curries cost B40–60. Daily 5–11pm.

The Shade Tree Next to *Krabi Resort* on Thanon Ao Nang. Despite being by the road, this is a therapeutic place for lunch or a snack as you can sit outside, streetside – under the shade tree – or inside, on loungers with axe pillows, among the paintings and handicrafts for sale. The deli-style menu includes brown bread, baguettes, Greek salads, imported cheese (sandwiches B140), chai, herbal teas and lots of fresh coffees. Daily 9am–6pm.

Tanta's Restaurant Thanon Ao Nang. Large, open-sided restaurant that attracts capacity crowds of diners eager to enjoy the exceptionally tasty, Thai and seafood dishes (B40–200), not to mention the Penang and *matsaman* curries. Daily 11am–11pm.

Wang Sai Beside the bridge at the eastern end of Thanon Nopparat Thara. Pricey but scenic seafood restaurant that overlooks the shore; most dishes cost from B80–200.

Hat Klong Muang

Fifteen kilometres' drive north of Ao Nang, an enclave of four- and five-star hotels is emerging at **HAT KLONG MUANG**. The beach here is pleasant rather than perfect – it's rocky in places, and there's exposed reef at low tide, but it's also long and very quiet, plus the sand is soft and there are plenty of casuarinas for shade. The *Sheraton* occupies the nicest bit. It's also refreshingly uncluttered, as a local byelaw ensures that sunloungers are restricted to hotels' shorefront gardens. The outlook over the eastern reaches of Phang Nga bay is also attractive, with several islands beckoning enticingly from the horizon, including the popular sea-kayaking destination of Ko Hong, famous for its clear waters, decent snorkelling and secret tidal lagoons (see p.426). The dusty, noisy presence of a gypsum mine between Hat Klong Muang and Hat Tubkaak, 4km further north, has stifled development in this area, but the concession ends in 2007 and the area is set to take off, with a Hilton and a Sofitel both already under construction. For the moment however, the biggest hotel here is the *Sheraton* and this is the focus of a cluster of tour operators, taxi services, small restaurants and bars, tailors and minimarkets; there's another little knot of commercial outlets around the *Andaman Beach Resort* further up the road. All the hotels have pools and can arrange excursions to attractions in the Krabi area and local longtail boatmen run snorkelling trips to nearby islands for B1200–1500. An occasional songthaew runs from Krabi town to Klong Muang (45min; B40), but there is as yet no regular public **transport**, so you're usually dependent on taxi touts and hotel shuttles; most hotels offer scheduled transport to Ao Nang or Krabi town for around B200 round-trip. Taxis from Krabi airport charge B700–900; see p.429 for airport information.

Accommodation and eating

Accommodation on Hat Klong Muang is currently all in the ⑧ category and above; for locations, see the map on p.437. All the hotels have **restaurants**, most of which charge correspondingly high prices, but there are alternatives, including *Ruean Mai*, a casual, sociable café that's right next to the *Sheraton*, on the beach, and serves tasty curries, fresh seafood and western standards for less than half the price of its neighbour. *Pan Sea*, diagonally opposite the *Sheraton* entrance, is another good bet for seafood, while there are several cheap noodle shops in and around the Klong Muang Plaza a few metres south down the road.

Andaman Holiday Resort 300m along the beach from the *Sheraton*, just south of the promontory ⓣ075 628300, ⓦwww.andamanholiday.com. Good-value mid-market place that's currently the cheapest of the Klong Muang beachfront hotels and so is popular with package tourists. It's set in lush, pleasantly landscaped, tropical gardens that drop down to the sea, and has three pools, a beachfront restaurant and 116 rooms. Choose between slightly dated rooms in the main building, cheaper, more appealing, semi-detached cottages, and top-end villas. ⑧–⑨

Krabi Sands About 300m north of the *Nakamanda* ⓣ075 600027, ⓦwww.krabisands.com. Located beside a khlong just across the road from a rocky patch of beach, this is an attractively designed little resort, comprising just 26 tastefully designed bungalows set around a garden with a serpentine swimming pool and a kids' pool. Bungalows are spacious and comfortable and all of them have air-con, TV and French windows on to the verandah. ⑧

Nakamanda On the promontory, 500m north up beach from the *Sheraton* ⓣ075 628200, ⓦwww.nakamanda.com. This exceptionally stylish but very expensive boutique hotel – all done out in slate, whitewash and dark wood – has just 39 sophisticated villa rooms set in stepped, terraced grounds full of clipped hedges and sleek lines. Rooms are elegant and capacious, with separate living areas, and bathtubs beneath skylight windows. There's a gorgeous sea-view pool and the grounds run down to the rocky point. High season rates from B12,000. ⑨

Sheraton Krabi Beach Resort ⓣ075 628000, ⓦwww.sheraton.com/krabi. Unusually for a top-notch beachfront hotel, the *Sheraton Krabi* does not boast of its sea views because the entire low-rise resort has been built amongst the mangroves and alongside a khlong; the result is refreshingly green and cool – and full of birdsong. The sea is anyway just a few steps away, accessed via a series of wooden walkways, and there's a seafront lawn for lounging. Rooms are large, sleek and very comfortable; there's a big pool, a spa and watersports centre, plus, weather permitting, nightly films on the outdoor movie screen. ⑨

The Tubkaak Krabi Hat Tubkaak, 4km north of *Krabi Sands* ⓣ075 628400, ⓦwww.tubkaakresort.com. Indulgent and very secluded little spot on Hat Tubkaak, 4km north of Klong Muang beach, with just 44 chic (and pricey) villas set among the beachfront trees around a free-form pool. Views from the shoreside beanbags across to Ko Hong and other islands are stunning. Facilities include a spa and a couple of restaurants, plus free kayak rental, though there are currently no other bars or restaurants between here and Hat Klong Muang, which is reached via the old gypsum mine. High-season rates from B14,000. ⑨

Ko Phi Phi Don

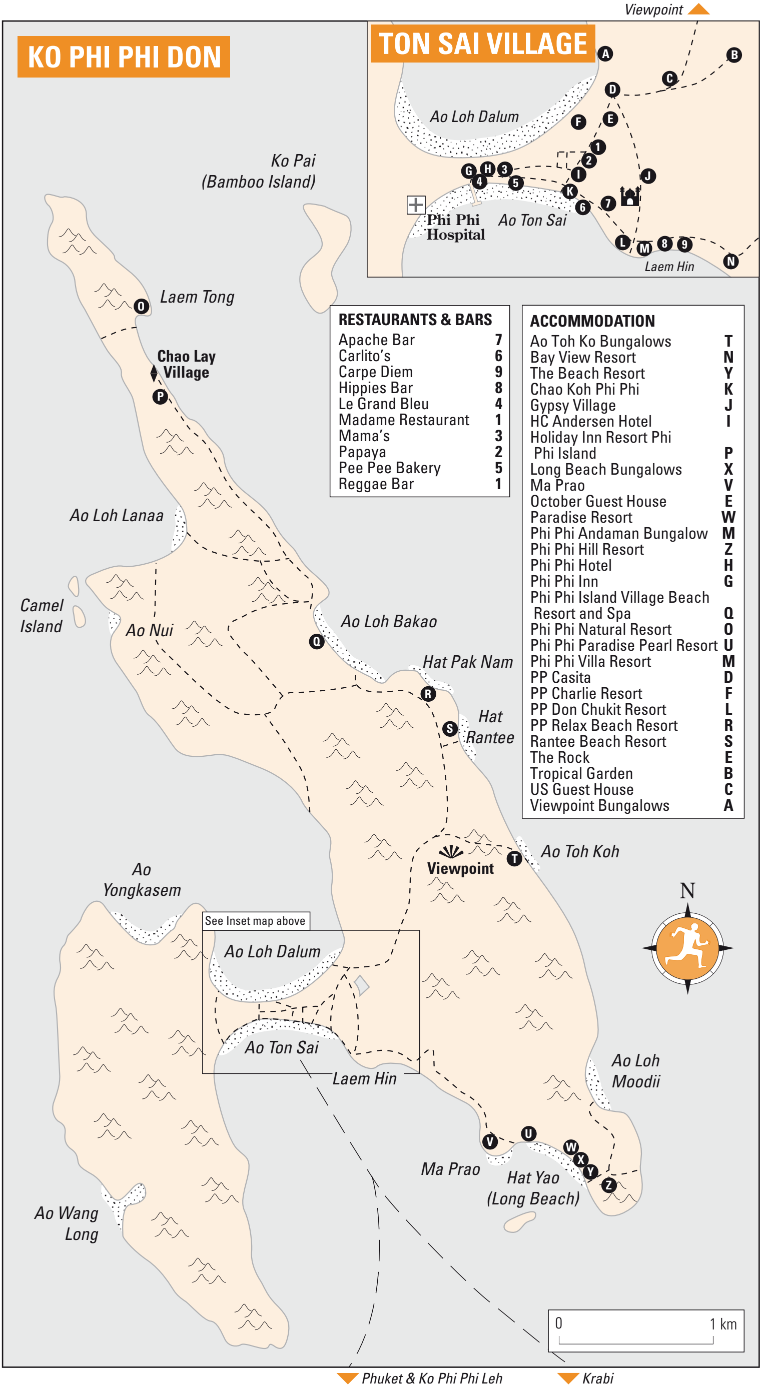
About 40km south of Krabi, the island of **KO PHI PHI DON** looks breathtakingly handsome as you approach from the sea, its classic arcs of pure white sand framed by dramatic cliffs and lapped by turquoise water so clear that the banks of cabbage coral and yellow-striped tiger fish are clearly visible from the surface. Phi Phi Don would actually be two islands were it not for the tenuous sandy isthmus that connects the hilly expanses to east and west, scalloped into the stunningly symmetrical double bays of Ao Ton Sai to the south and Ao Loh Dalum to the north. So steep is the smaller western half that the island's tiny population lives in isolated clusters across the slopes of the densely vegetated eastern stretch, while the tourist accommodation is mainly confined to the intervening sandy flats, with a few developments on the beaches beneath the cliffs east and north of the isthmus.

Such beauty, however, belies the island's turbulent recent history. By the early 1990s, the island's reputation as a tropical idyll was bringing huge crowds of backpackers to its shores, and these began to lose their looks under the weight of unrestricted development and nonexistent infrastructure. The problem worsened after uninhabited little sister island **Ko Phi Phi Leh** – under national marine park protection on account of its lucrative bird's-nest business (see box on p.460) – gained worldwide attention as the location for the movie *The Beach* in 1999, adding day-trippers, package-tourists and big hotels to the mix on Phi Phi Don. Then, in December 2004, the **tsunami** struck. As a five-metre-high wave crashed in from the north, over the hotels, restaurants and hundreds of sunbathers on Ao Loh Dalum, a three-metre-high wave from the south hurtled in across the ferry dock and tourist village at Ao Ton Sai. The waves met in the middle, obliterating seventy percent of all buildings on the sandy isthmus, uprooting scores of trees, and killing two thousand people. The rest of the island was barely affected. Volunteers and donations flooded in to help the island back on its feet, but the response from the authorities was less straightforward – partly, it was said, out of a desire to start afresh with a more sustainable environmental approach, and partly, it was rumoured, because influential bigwigs were keen to develop the island for their own profit.

Despite the continued stalling by officials, large swathes of the affected area have been rebuilt and visitors are pouring onto the island again. **Ton Sai village** has re-emerged as the island's commercial heart and its legendary nightlife is kicking once more. All boats dock in its bay, **Ao Ton Sai**, from where it's a short walk to accommodation in the village and at **Laem Hin**, the next little stretch of sand to the east, or to **Ao Loh Dalum**, the still gorgeous, deeply curved bay across the isthmus. These areas attract the bulk of Phi Phi's day-trippers and overnight guests and get pretty congested, so those in search of a quieter life head elsewhere, either to **Hat Yao**, another fine beach a short boat ride away or, more peaceful still, to one of the bays further north, at **Hat Toh Ko**, **Ao Rantee**, **Hat Pak Nam**, **Ao Loh Bakao** or **Laem Tong**.

Island practicalities

Ferries to Ko Phi Phi Don all dock at Ao Ton Sai. They run at least twice daily year-round **from Krabi**, 40km to the north (currently departing Krabi at 10am & 3pm and returning from Phi Phi at 9am & 1.30pm; 2hr; B300); and **from Phuket**,


KO PHI PHI DON
TON SAI VILLAGE
Viewpoint
Ao Loh Dalum
Phi Phi Hospital
Ao Ton Sai
Laem Hin
Ko Pai (Bamboo Island)
Laem Tong
Chao Lay Village
Ao Loh Lanaa
Camel Island
Ao Nui
Ao Loh Bakao
Hat Pak Nam
Hat Rantee
Viewpoint
Ao Toh Koh
Ao Yongkasem
See Inset map above
Ao Loh Dalum
Ao Ton Sai
Laem Hin
Ao Loh Moodii
Ma Prao
Hat Yao (Long Beach)
Ao Wang Long
N
0
1 km
Phuket & Ko Phi Phi Leh
Krabi

RESTAURANTS & BARS	
Apache Bar	7
Carlito's	6
Carpe Diem	9
Hippies Bar	8
Le Grand Bleu	4
Madame Restaurant	1
Mama's	3
Papaya	2
Pee Pee Bakery	5
Reggae Bar	1

ACCOMMODATION	
Ao Toh Ko Bungalows	T
Bay View Resort	N
The Beach Resort	Y
Chao Koh Phi Phi	K
Gypsy Village	J
HC Andersen Hotel	I
Holiday Inn Resort Phi Phi Island	P
Long Beach Bungalows	X
Ma Prao	V
October Guest House	E
Paradise Resort	W
Phi Phi Andaman Bungalow	M
Phi Phi Hill Resort	Z
Phi Phi Hotel	H
Phi Phi Inn	G
Phi Phi Island Village Beach Resort and Spa	Q
Phi Phi Natural Resort	O
Phi Phi Paradise Pearl Resort	U
Phi Phi Villa Resort	M
PP Casita	D
PP Charlie Resort	F
PP Don Chukit Resort	L
PP Relax Beach Resort	R
Rantee Beach Resort	S
The Rock	E
Tropical Garden	B
US Guest House	C
Viewpoint Bungalows	A

48km to the west (departing Phuket at 8.30am & 1pm and returning from Phi Phi at 9am & 2.30pm; 1hr 30min–2hr 30min; B350). From November to May, daily ferries run to Phi Phi Don from **Ao Nang**, via **Laem Phra Nang** (departing Ao Nang at 9am, returning from Phi Phi at 3.30pm; 2hr 30min; B350); and from **Ko Lanta Yai** (departing Ko Lanta at 8am & 1pm and returning from Phi Phi at 11.30am & 2pm; 1hr 30min; B300). Tour agents in Phuket, Ao Nang, Krabi town and Ko Lanta all organize snorkelling excursions to Phi Phi Don and Phi Phi Leh, with prices starting from B1000, or B700 for under-12s.

From Ao Ton Sai you can catch a **longtail** to any of the other beaches, or walk – there are a couple of short motorbike tracks but no roads on Phi Phi Don, just a series of paths across the steep and at times rugged interior, at points affording superb views over the bays. The only way you can get to Phi Phi Leh is by longtail from Phi Phi Don, or as part of a tour.

Accommodation on the island is expensive and often seems poor value compared to equivalent places on the mainland. This is partly because, since the tsunami, demand has outstripped supply; in addition, the financial blow to islanders was enormous and they need to recoup their losses as best they can, and life on the island is expensive – electricity, for example, costs more than three times as much per unit as it does on the mainland. Room prices listed below are for high season, which runs from November to April, but most bungalow operators slap on a thirty to fifty percent surcharge during Christmas and New Year; reservations are essential over that fortnight, and are strongly recommended throughout high season. From May to October you should be able to negotiate up to fifty percent off the prices listed.

Ton Sai village has all the island shops and **services**, though there is also Internet access at some hotels on Hat Yao, Ao Loh Bakao and Laem Tong.

Ton Sai village, Ao Loh Dalum and Laem Hin

TON SAI VILLAGE is the commercial and nightlife centre of the island, a hectic warren of narrow streets packed with day-trippers and lined with dive shops, tour agents, restaurants, bars and minimarkets. Nearly every visitor arrives at the pier here, and few escape the attentions of the army of touts trying to steer you towards a guest house, boat tour or diving trip. **Ao Ton Sai** beach itself used to be most attractive at the western end, under the limestone karsts, but with so much damage to its hinterland it's nowhere near the beauty it once was and the eerie presence of the still unrenovated *PP Island Cabana* hotel doesn't help. The central part of the bay is too busy with ferries and longtails for swimming, so most people simply head for **AO LOH DALUM**, less than 300m north across the narrow isthmus, which looks astonishingly pretty at high tide, with its glorious curve of powder-white sand beautifully set off by pale blue water, though it's a different story at low-water, as the tide goes out for miles. The **viewpoint** that overlooks the far eastern edge of Ao Loh Dalum affords a magnificent panorama over the twin bays of Ao Loh Dalum and Ao Ton Sai: every evening crowds of people make the steep 15-minute climb up the clearly signposted concrete steps for sunset shots, but early morning is an equally good time, and the shop at the summit, whose owners have created a pretty tropical garden around it, serves coffee as well as cold drinks. From the viewpoint you can descend the rocky and at times almost sheer paths to the trio of little east-coast bays at Ao Toh Ko, Ao Rantee (Lanti), and Hat Pak Nam. East along the coast from the Ton Sai pier, about ten minutes' walk down the main track, is the promontory known as **LAEM HIN**, beyond which lies a small stretch of beach

Diving, snorkelling, kayaking and rock-climbing off Ko Phi Phi

More accessible than Ko Similan and Ko Surin, Ko Phi Phi and its neighbouring islands rate very high on the list of Andaman coast **diving and snorkelling** spots, offering depths of up to 35m, visibility touching 30m, and the possibility of seeing white-tip sharks, moray eels and stingrays. At uninhabited **Ko Pai** (or **Bamboo Island**), off Laem Tong on Phi Phi Don's northeast coast, much of the reef lies close to the surface, and gives you a chance of seeing the occasional turtle and possibly the odd silver-and-black-striped banded sea snake – which is poisonous but rarely aggressive. At the adjacent **Ko Yung** (or **Mosquito Island**), the offshore reef plunges into a steep-sided and spectacular drop. Off the west coast of Phi Phi Don, **Ao Yongkasem**, within kayaking distance of Ao Loh Dalum, also has good reefs, as do the tranquil waters at **Ao Maya** on the west coast of Phi Phi Leh. For a description of the other local top sites, see p.408.

Dive shops on Phuket (see p.409), Ao Nang (p.447) and Laem Phra Nang (p.440) run daily excursions here, and there are also about twenty centres on Phi Phi itself. The biggest concentration is in Ton Sai village, where there are over a dozen competing outfits, though, as they're obliged to charge identical prices, talking to other divers is probably the best way to make your decision. Some operators cut corners so it's also very important to check your operator's credentials and equipment (see Basics p.57 for general advice on diving) and some use longtail boats rather than the much more comfortable, better-equipped proper dive boats: ask to see a photo of your boat before booking. A few places also have speedboats, which makes access to the further dive sites significantly faster. Also note that, despite what some of the less scrupulous dive shops may say, it is considered risky for a novice diver with fewer than twenty dives under their belt to dive at Hin Daeng and Hin Muang (see p.409), due to the depth and the current; the most reputable dive shops will demand an Advanced Divers certificate before agreeing to take you there. Many dive centres on Phi Phi sell imported dive equipment and they all rent equipment too. Recommended Ton Sai operators include Visa Diving, on the main track to the pier (Ⓣ087 280 1721, Ⓦwww.visadiving.com); Moskito, a PADI Five-Star Instructor Development Centre one block inland from Pee Pee Bakery (Ⓣ075 601154, Ⓦwww.moskitodiving.com); and Viking Divers, on the cross-island soi inland from *Chao Koh Phi Phi Lodge* (Ⓣ081 719 3375, Ⓦwww.vikingdiversthailand.com). There are also small dive centres on Hat Yao, Ao Loh Bakao and Laem Tong. Standard prices for

that's quieter than Ao Ton Sai and better for swimming. Bungalows cover the Laem Hin promontory and beachfront, and they're popular places to stay, being in easy reach of the restaurants and nightlife at Ao Ton Sai but feeling a little less claustrophobic and hectic.

Much of the village has been seamlessly rebuilt so in places the only reminders are the before-and-after photos posted on the walls of some of the surviving Ton Sai shops and restaurants. A small Tsunami Memorial Park of carefully tended shrubs and garden benches, just inland from the east end of Loh Dalum near *Viewpoint Bungalows*, commemorates some of the victims, and the smilewithpum.com foundation, based at *Pum* restaurant in the village, sells books of kids' tsunami art and stories, as well as sarongs and jewellery, in aid of the 104 island children who lost one or both parents in the waves.

Ton Sai village has all the essential services, including **ATMs** and **exchange** counters run by national banks (daily 7am–10pm), international telephone call centres and scores of little places offering **Internet access**. The island's only health centre, **Phi Phi Hospital** (Ⓣ081 270 4481) is at the western end of Ton Sai, and there's a **police** box (Ⓣ081 536 2427) next to the *Apache Bar* on the track to Laem

day-trips including two tanks, equipment and lunch are: B2200 for local reefs off Phi Phi Leh; B3200 for the King Cruiser wreck; and B4500 for Hin Daeng and Hin Muang (by speedboat). Excalibur Liveaboards (ⓦwww.thailand-liveaboard.com), which runs out of Moskito, organizes live-aboard trips direct from Phi Phi to the Similan and Surin islands (US$680 for four days). **Dive courses** on Phi Phi cost B3100 for the introductory Discover Scuba day, B11,900 for the certificated four-day Openwater course, and B9500 for a two-day Advanced course. If you're short on time, email ahead to reserve a place on a dive course or live-aboard trip. The nearest **recompression chambers** are on Phuket (see p.408); check to see that your dive operator is insured to use one of them.

Nearly all the tour operators and bungalow operations on Phi Phi Don organize day and half-day **snorkelling** trips. Prices average B600 for a day-trip, including lunch and snorkelling gear, with the price depending on the size of the boat and number of participants; dive boats charge the same. Longtail boatmen charge around B1200 per boat for private two-person half-day snorkel trips including equipment. In the case of snorkelling, the longtails that run from Ko Phi Phi are better than the larger fishing boats and the Phuket cruise ships, which are so popular that you can rarely see the fish for the swimmers. Many dive operators will take accompanying snorkellers on their one-day dives for B600.

The limestone cliffs and secluded bays of the Phi Phi islands make perfect **kayaking** territory, as the lagoons and palm-fringed coasts are much better appreciated in silence than accompanied by the roar of a longtail or cruise ship. If you rent a kayak for a whole day you can incorporate sunbathing and snorkelling breaks on small, unpopulated bays nearby. Tour operators in the village and on all beaches rent out kayaks at around B200 per hour or B800 per day, depending on size and quality. Kayak/snorkel tours of Phi Phi Leh and Phi Phi Don cost B600.

Phi Phi's topography is also a gift for **rock-climbers** and several places in the village offer climbing instruction and equipment rental. Prices average B500 for a two-hour beginners' introduction, and B1300 for a one-day course with full instruction and equipment. The main climbing area is a small beach just to the west of Ao Ton Sai, and includes the Ton Sai Tower and the Drinking Wall, with heights of 15m and 30m respectively. A newer attraction is **cliff-jumping**, offered by several tour agencies and featuring jumps of up to 18m off a Phi Phi Don cliff.

Hin. A number of outlets offer **bicycle rental** for B200/day, but outside the village there aren't really any cyclable tracks.

Accommodation

Most of Ton Sai's **accommodation** is packed between the Ao Ton Sai pier and the base of the viewpoint hill to the east. Rooms are snapped up fast in this area, so prices are high and standards vary; to save you dragging your pack fruitlessly from place to place you can make use of the tour agents close by the pier who will ring round for vacancies for you. The cheapest options are often business premises that have simply stuck up a sign announcing "room for rent", though even at these places you're unlikely to get much under ④ in high season and for that may have to share a bathroom. Alternatively, ask at any of the dive shops along the main drag as they often know who is currently offering the best deal.

Ton Sai village and Ao Loh Dalum

HC Andersen Hotel ⓣ089 287 7980, ⓦwww.phiphisteakhouse.com. Small, all-air-con hotel where standards are pretty good, though views are nil as it's jammed behind several street businesses and the cheapest rooms are not much bigger than a double bed. Every room has a TV and DVD player. ⑥–⑦

October Guest House ⓣ075 601193. Rooms here are all built on higher ground, so you get some kind of a view from most balconies. The cheapest en-suite fan rooms are cell-like but decent enough; the better versions have longer views and the option of air-con. Fan ⑤, air ⑥

Phi Phi Hotel ⓣ075 611233, ⓦwww.phiphi-hotel.com. One of the biggest hotels in Ton Sai, with a range of mid-market air-con rooms in low-rise buildings just inland from the pier. The top-end rooms have sea views, while the cheapest have neither window, view nor TV. There's a small pool on site. ⑦–⑧

Phi Phi Inn ⓣ081 910 4622, ⓔphiphi_inn@yahoo.com. Small, sparklingly clean, all-air-con little hotel, where all rooms have TV and a balcony, though only the upstairs ones have the chance of a view and anyway enjoy more privacy. ⑦

PP Casita ⓣ075 601215. On the northeast edge of the village, just inland from Ao Loh Dalum, this place is designed as its own little village, comprising some 50 dinky whitewashed cabanas built on stilts and connected by wooden walkways that sit above an embryonic garden that should be pretty in time (tsunami salt water ruined the soil). Interiors are good considering the competition, with fans, platform beds, satellite TV and nice tiled bathrooms. The drawback is that the cabanas are tightly packed and outdoor seating is on the walkway, making it a sociable place, but not very private or quiet. ⑤

PP Charlie Resort ⓣ075 620615, ⓦwww.ppcharlie.com. While it waits to rebuild its seafront properties on Ao Loh Dalum, *PP Charlie Resort* is meantime offering some of the best value and most popular rooms in the Ton Sai-Loh Dalum areas. It has 40 rooms in a two-storey block, 150m inland from Ao Loh Dalum, with the choice of small or large, fan or air-con. All rooms have sea views and are well maintained. There's also a swimming pool but you need to pay to use it. Fan ④–⑤, air-con ⑥

The Rock ⓣ084 052 8270. Traveller-oriented hangout offering the cheapest beds on the island, in a mixed-sex four-bed dorm (B200/bed) and similar sixteen-bed dorm (B200/bed). Also has a few singles and doubles with shared bathrooms. ③

Tropical Garden ⓣ081 968 1436, ⓔtimeandtide101@hotmail.com. The good-sized rough-timber fan and air-con huts here are mostly built on stilts up the side of an outcrop, beyond the turn-off for the path to the viewpoint. The better ones have a breezy veranda (though not much of a view) and there's a refreshing amount of greenery around, plus a tiny pool, despite being surrounded by other accommodation. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑦

US Guest House ⓣ089 728 1509. This two-storey block of functional en-suite fan and air-con rooms has the look and feel of an urban guesthouse, and offers some of the cheaper rooms in the area. It's close by the base of the viewpoint access steps. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑦

Viewpoint Bungalows ⓣ075 622351, ⓦwww.phiphiviewpoint.com. Strung out across and up the cliffside at the far eastern end of Ao Loh Dalum, these attractive and comfortable, if pricey, bungalows enjoy great views out over the bay. The most expensive have air-con and TV and full-on edge-of-the-hill bay vistas. It's a popular, well-managed place and facilities include a scenically sited restaurant, a couple of bars and a small pool. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑧

Laem Hin

Bay View Resort Yao ⓣ075 621223, ⓦwww.phiphibayview.com. The nicely furnished air-con bungalows here have massive windows affording great views and occupy a superb position high on the cliffside, at the far eastern end of Laem Hin beach and stretching east along the hillside almost as far as *Ma Prao* on Hat Yao. ⑧

Gypsy Village ⓣ075 601044. The 25 shabby but relatively cheap concrete bungalows, all with fan and attached bathroom, are set round an unusually spacious lawn about 150m down the track between the mosque and *Phi Phi Villa*. ④

Phi Phi Andaman Bungalow ⓣ081 124 5547, ⓦwww.krabidir.com/ppandamanresort. Set in a secluded enclosure just a few metres back from the beach, the bungalows here are arranged in a square around a large lawn and small central swimming pool. There are low-quality terraced fan rooms at the back, and better, freestanding bungalows with either fan or air-con around the sides. There's also a public gym on site. Fan rooms ⑤, fan bungalows ⑥, air-con bungalows ⑦

PP Don Chukit Resort ⓣ075 618126. Choose between small, mid-range, air-con bungalows, reasonably well spaced around a pretty garden, and similar but pricier (and probably noisier) versions beside the seafront walkway, with uninterrupted sea views. Also has some fan rooms in single-storey blocks at the back of the compound. Handily located just east of the promontory, not far beyond *Carlito's* bar. Fan rooms ⑥, air-con bungalows ⑦

Phi Phi Villa Resort ⓣ075 601100, ⓦwww.phiphivillaresort.com. The best of the many options at this outfit are the huge, deluxe, thatched air-con family cottages occupying the front section of the prettily landscaped garden, near the small pool. Also available are smaller air-con bungalows, some pretty scruffy fan bungalows and a few cheap fan rooms right at the back. Fan rooms ⑤, fan bungalows ⑥, air-con bungalows ⑧, family bungalows ⑨

Eating

Ton Sai is the best place to eat on the island, offering everything from bakery cafés to seafood **restaurants**, though don't expect *haute cuisine*. Less expensive but arguably more tasty are the typically Thai curry-and-rice stalls in the heart of the village, and there are always lots of hawkers flogging rotis and fried bananas from their hand-carts.

Le Grand Bleu Classy place close to *Phi Phi Hotel* serving French-inspired food, including lots of fresh seafood, duck fillet with mango (B270), sirloin steak (B340) and changing menus of the day. Nightly from 6pm.

Madame Restaurant Deservedly popular spot almost next door to *Reggae Bar* which serves good curries – penang, massaman green and red – for around B70, plus plenty of thin-crust pizzas from about B180. Also has a decent vegetarian selection, cheap glasses of wine (B60) and nightly movies. Daily from 4pm.

Mama's Known for its fresh seafood (from B80) and tempting cakes. Also does a reasonable selection of tapas for B30 a dish. Daily 11am–3pm & 6–11pm.

Papaya One of the best of several village-style kitchens whose authentic and reasonably cheap Thai standards, including noodle soups, *phat thai* (B60), fried rice dishes and fiery curries, makes it very popular with locals and dive staff. Daily 11am–10pm.

Pee Pee Bakery The usual venue for breakfast, with its different blends of real coffee (B35–50), set breakfasts (B75) and big selection of freshly baked croissants, Danish pastries, home-made breads, cakes and cookies. Daily 7am–8pm.

Drinking

Ton Sai nightlife is young and drunken, involving endless buckets of Sansom and Red Bull, dance music played into the early hours, and fire-juggling shows on the beach. All the bars offer a pretty similar formula, so it's often the one-off events and happy hours that determine which one gets the biggest crowds.

Apache Bar At the eastern end of the village, just beyond *Chao Ko Phi Phi*, on the track to Laem Hin. Big, multi-tiered bar and dance floor that hosts regular parties (check locally posted flyers), stages ladyboy cabaret shows and has a long happy hour.

Carlito's At the eastern end of the village, next to *Chao Ko Phi Phi*, on the track to Laem Hin. Popular seafront joint with a long cocktails menu, an easy-going vibe, plus DJs and a dance floor.

Carpe Diem Opposite *PP Villa* at Laem Hin. There's cushion seating on the upper terrace here, and nightly fire shows from around 10pm.

Hippies Bar Across from *PP Andaman* on Laem Hin. Hugely popular place with a chilled-out sea-view bar and restaurant that shows nightly movies at 8pm, followed by fire shows at 10pm and hosts regular half-moon parties. You can learn fire-juggling here yourself every afternoon.

Reggae Bar In the heart of the village, on the soi that runs north beside *Chao Koh Phi Phi Lodge.* A Phi Phi institution that's been running for years in various incarnations. These days it arranges regular amateur *muay thai* bouts in its boxing ring and has pool tables and a bar around the sides.

Hat Yao

With its deluxe sand and large reefs packed with polychromatic marine life just 20m offshore, **HAT YAO** (Long Beach) is considered the best of Phi Phi's main beaches, but that can be hard to appreciate, with hundreds of sunbathers pitching up on the gorgeous sand every day and throngs of day-trippers making things even worse at lunchtime. Unperturbed by all the attention, shoals of golden butterfly fish, turquoise and purple parrot fish and hooped angel fish continue to scour what remains of Hat Yao's coral for food, escorted by brigades of small cleaner fish who live off the parasites trapped in the scales of larger species. Long Beach Divers

(ⓦwww.leisure-dive.com) at *Long Beach* offers all the same **dive** facilities as shops in the village (see p.454) and offers discounts on accommodation at *Long Beach* bungalows to anyone doing a dive course.

Longtail **boats** do the ten-minute shuttle between Hat Yao and Ao Ton Sai (B80 per person, or B100 after dark), but it's also possible to **walk** between the two in half an hour. At low tide you can get to Hat Yao along the shore, though this involves quite a bit of clambering over smooth wet rocks – not ideal when wearing a heavy rucksack, nor after a night spent trawling the bars of Ton Sai village (take a torch). The alternative route takes you over the hillside via the steps up from *Bay View Resort* and through neighbouring *Arayaburi Resort* on Laem Hin – with a side track running down to *Ma Prao*'s little bay – and then finally dropping down to Hat Yao. A different path connects Hat Yao to the as yet undeveloped bay of **Ao Loh Moodii**, ten minutes' walk to the north: the trail starts between *The Beach Resort* and *Phi Phi Hill*'s restaurant and can also be accessed from *Phi Phi Hill* itself.

Accommodation

The Beach Resort ⓣ075 618267, ⓔphi-phi-the-beach-resort@hotmail.com. Currently the poshest option on Hat Yao, this place has just 19 large, timber-clad chalets built on stilts up the hillside. Each one enjoys attractive sea views from its generous balcony (albeit partially occluded by the tin roofs of the adjacent *Long Beach*) and has a fairly upscale interior, with air-con and liberal use of wood for flooring and wall panels. The price depends on the view. The resort also has a small beachfront pool. ⑧

Long Beach Bungalows ⓣ075 612217. The first choice of most budget travellers, this fairly cheap, well-located and long-running option has dozens of tightly packed huts for rent. At the bottom end you get ultra-simple bamboo huts, many of which contain nothing more than a bed, a fan and a mosquito net, though some also have their own bathrooms. The better ones are sturdier wooden huts and many of these are right on the shorefront. Shared bathroom ②, en suite ④, beachfront ⑤

Ma Prao ⓣ075 622486, ⓦwww.maprao.com. Tucked away in a little cove just west of Hat Yao itself, with easy access via a rocky path, this small, secluded and friendly Belgian-run place has 30 characterful wood and bamboo bungalows ranged across the hillside overlooking the sea, and a pleasant eating area out front. The cheapest A-frame huts have nothing more than a mattress, a fan and a mozzie net and share bathrooms, but some have a terrace; among the more expensive en-suite options, you can choose to have a boat-shaped deck, a rooftop sun-terrace or a bamboo villa set high among the trees. There's a small dive operation here, you can rent kayaks, and the kitchen produces a long menu that includes eighty different cocktails, and home-made yoghurt. Phone the day before to secure a room. Shared bathroom ③, en suite ⑤–⑦

Paradise Resort ⓣ081 968 3982, ⓦwww.paradiseresort.co.th. The 25 fan and air-con bungalows here are all huge and well furnished, and are located either right on the shorefront or just a few metres back from it. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑦

Phi Phi Hill Resort ⓣ075 618203, ⓦwww.phiphihill.com. The fifty mint-green wooden cabins here occupy a glorious spot high above the beach, overlooking the far eastern end of Hat Yao. With fine sunrise or sunset views, depending on your location, and plenty of breeze, the only off-putting factor here is the one hundred steps that connect the resort with the beach below (though there is a pulley system for luggage). Rooms are simply furnished and come with fan and air-con; the cheapest share bathrooms. Shared bathroom ③, en suite with fan ④–⑥, air-con ⑦

Phi Phi Paradise Pearl Resort ⓣ075 622100. The 30 bungalows at this efficiently run place are fairly well spaced along the western half of the beach, with none more than a few steps from the shore. Interiors are unremarkable but perfectly comfortable and come with fan or air-con. There's Internet access and an international phone service here, plus a tour counter and book exchange. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑦

Ao Toh Ko, Hat Rantee and Hat Pak Nam

Travellers wanting to escape the crowds around Ton Sai and Hat Yao without spending a fortune head for the trio of little bays midway along the east coast: Ao

Toh Ko, Hat Rantee (Lanti) and Hat Pak Nam. The bays are quiet and support just a few bungalows each. Longtail transfers cost about B100 per person from Ao Ton Sai, or you can reach the bays inland, via trails that run from the Viewpoint above Ao Loh Dalum (see p.453) and take at least half an hour to walk. At **AO TOH KO**, the range of huts at the well-liked *Ao Toh Ko Bungalows* (Ⓣ081 731 9470, Ⓔdreaminfijian@hotmail.com; ②–③) encompasses basic ones with shared bathrooms, plus better en-suite options including some that are set right over the rocks. On **Hat Rantee**, *Rantee Beach Resort* (Ⓣ086 746 3297, Ⓔranteebeach@hotmail.com; ①–⑤) has rudimentary bamboo huts, some of which have private bathrooms; the priciest enjoy direct sea views. *PP Relax Beach Resort* (Ⓣ081 083 0194, Ⓔsuteejanson@yahoo.com; ⑤–⑥) on **Hat Pak Nam** offers the most comfortable, and expensive, accommodation, in 16 en-suite thatched bamboo bungalows.

Ao Loh Bakao and Laem Tong

Far removed from the hustle of Ao Ton Sai and its environs, the beautiful, secluded northern beaches at **Ao Loh Bakao** and **Laem Tong** are the domain of just a few upscale resorts. If travelling from Phuket, you can get direct **transport** to Laem Tong on the Andaman Wave Master boat (Ⓣ076 232561, Ⓦwww.andamanwavemaster.com; departs Phuket at 8.30am & 1.30pm and departs Laem Tong at 9am and 2.30pm; B500). From anywhere else, you'll need to take a ferry to Ao Ton Sai and then transfer from there. There are no scheduled boats to Loh Bakao or Laem Tong from Ao Ton Sai, but pre-booked guests should be entitled to a reasonably priced transfer by longtail or speedboat. Chartering your own longtail from Ao Ton Sai will cost about B400–500; the trip takes around 40 minutes to Ao Loh Bakao and a further 15 minutes north to Laem Tong.

Ao Loh Bakao and Ao Lanaa

Just over halfway up the coast, the 104 plush, air-conditioned chalets at 🏃 *Phi Phi Island Village Beach Resort and Spa* (Ⓣ075 628900, Ⓦwww.ppisland.com; ⑨; rates start at B6100 and rise if you want a sea view) have the gorgeous eight-hundred-metre-long white-sand beach and turquoise waters of **AO LOH BAKAO** all to themselves. It's a popular honeymoon spot, and a lovely location for anyone looking for a quiet, comfortable break. The thatched, split-bamboo bungalows are designed in traditional Thai style and furnished with character and elegance. There's a good-sized pool and spa centre in the prettily landscaped tropical gardens, as well as a dive centre, tennis courts and kayak rental. If you tire of these sands, just follow the clearly signed track to **AO LANAA** across on the west coast: it's a 10-minute walk away, via a cheap Thai food restaurant and through the remnants of a palm grove. Wilder and more natural than Ao Loh Bakao, and prone to flotsam, Ao Lanaa's long, semicircular white-sand bay has no facilities other than a stall that sells drinks and rents kayak and longtail boats. Following the track in the other direction, north along the coast, will bring you to Laem Tong in half an hour.

Laem Tong

Almost right at Phi Phi's northernmost tip, **LAEM TONG** is busier and significantly more commercial than Loh Bakao, with several upmarket resorts along its also very inviting white-sand shores, many of them enjoying views across to nearby Bamboo Island and Mosquito Island. The beach is home to a group of Urak Lawoy *chao ley* "sea gypsies" (see pp.370–71 for more information on them), whose village is next to the *Holiday Inn*; all longtail boat tours and transfers are run by Laem Tong's *chao ley* cooperative.

At the southern end of the beach, *Holiday Inn Resort Phi Phi Island* (ⓣ075 261334, ⓦwww.phiphi-palmbeach.com; ⑨; published rates from B6200) offers 76 luxurious air-conditioned bungalows set in graceful gardens of tidy lawns and flowering shrubs plus a swimming pool, dive centre and tennis courts, as well as batik and cookery courses. Up at the northern end, the old-style air-con rooms and wooden chalets at *Phi Phi Natural Resort* (ⓣ075 613010, ⓦwww.phiphinatural.com; ⑧–⑨) are scattered around an extensive tropical shorefront garden that stretches along the coast to the next tiny uninhabited bay. Facilities here include a swimming pool and a terrace restaurant offering fine sea views, plus snorkelling, fishing and dive trips.

Ko Phi Phi Leh

More rugged than its twin, Ko Phi Phi Don, and a quarter the size, **KO PHI PHI LEH** is home only to the **sea swift**, whose valuable nests are gathered by intrepid *chao ley* for export to specialist Chinese restaurants all over the world. Tourists descend on the island not only to see the nest-collecting caves but also to snorkel off its sheltered bays and to admire the very spot where *The Beach* was filmed; the anchoring of tourist and fishing boats has damaged much of the coral in the most beautiful reefs. Most snorkelling trips out of Phi Phi Don include Phi Phi Leh, which is only twenty minutes south of Ao Ton Sai, but you can also get there by hiring a longtail from Ao Ton Sai or Hat Yao (about B1200/six-person boat). If you do charter your own boat, go either very early or very late in the day, to beat the tour-group rush. Alternatively, why not try paddling yourself in and out of the quiet bays in a kayak – see box on p.455 for details.

Most idyllic of all the bays in the area is **Ao Maya** on the southwest coast, where the water is still and very clear and the coral extremely varied – a perfect snorkelling spot and a feature of most day-trips. Visit after 4pm to see it at its peaceful best. Unfortunately the discarded lunch boxes and water bottles of day-trippers threaten the health of the marine life in **Ao Phi Leh**, an almost completely enclosed east-coast lagoon of breathtakingly turquoise water. Not far from the

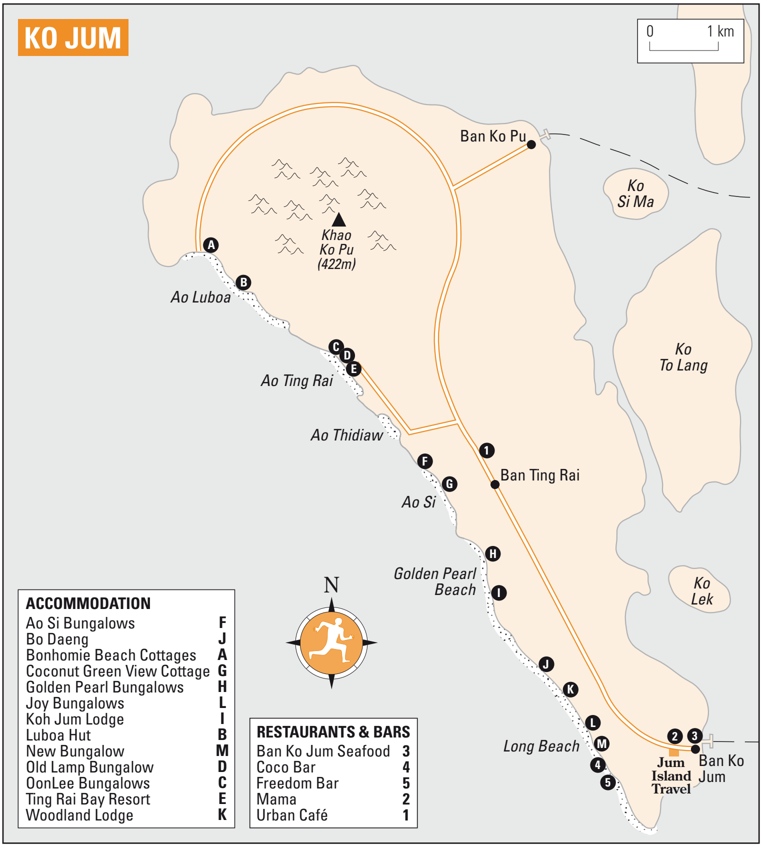
Bird's-nesting

Prized for its aphrodisiac and energizing qualities, **bird's-nest soup** is such a delicacy in Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong that ludicrous sums of money change hands for a dish whose basic ingredients are tiny twigs glued together with bird's spit. Collecting these nests is a lucrative but life-endangering business: sea swifts (known as edible nest swiftlets) build their nests in rock crevices hundreds of metres above sea level, often on sheer cliff-faces or in cavernous hollowed-out karst. **Nest-building** begins in January and the harvesting season usually lasts from February to May, during which time the female swiftlet builds three nests on the same spot, none of them more than 12cm across, by secreting an unbroken thread of saliva, which she winds round as if making a coil pot. **Gatherers** will only steal the first two nests made by each bird, prising them off the cave walls with special metal forks. Gathering the nests demands faultless agility and balance, skills that seem to come naturally to the *chao ley*, whose six-man teams bring about four hundred nests down the perilous bamboo scaffolds each day, weighing about 4kg in total. At a market rate of up to B120,000 per kilo, so much money is at stake that a government franchise must be granted before any collecting commences, and armed guards often protect the sites at night. The *chao ley* seek spiritual protection from the dangers of the job by making offerings to the spirits of the cliff or cave at the beginning of the season; in the Viking Cave, they place buffalo flesh, horns and tails at the foot of one of the stalagmites.

cove, the **Viking Cave** gets its misleading name from the scratchy wall-paintings of Chinese junks inside, but more interesting than these 400-year-old graffiti is the **bird's-nesting** that goes on here: rickety bamboo scaffolding extends hundreds of metres up to the roof of the cave, where the harvesters spend the day scraping the tiny sea-swift nests off the rockface.

Ko Jum

Situated halfway between Krabi and Ko Lanta Yai, **KO JUM** (also known as **Ko Pu**) is the sort of laid-back spot that people come to for a couple of days, then can't bring themselves to leave. Though there's plenty of accommodation on the island, there's nothing more than a couple of beach bars for evening entertainment, and little to do during the day except try out the half-dozen west-coast beaches and read your book under a tree. The beaches may not be pristine, and are in some places unswimmably rocky at low tide, but they're mostly long and wild, fronted


KO JUM
0 1 km
Ban Ko Pu
Ko Si Ma
Laem Kruat
Khao Ko Pu (422m)
A
B
Ao Luboa
C
D
E
Ao Ting Rai
Ao Thidiaw
Ko To Lang
F
G
1
Ban Ting Rai
Ao Si
H
Golden Pearl Beach
I
Ko Lek
N
J
K
L
M
Long Beach
2
3
4
5
Jum Island Travel
Ban Ko Jum
Laem Kruat
ACCOMMODATION
Ao Si Bungalows F
Bo Daeng J
Bonhomie Beach Cottages A
Coconut Green View Cottage G
Golden Pearl Bungalows H
Joy Bungalows L
Koh Jum Lodge I
Luboa Hut B
New Bungalow M
Old Lamp Bungalow D
OonLee Bungalows C
Ting Rai Bay Resort E
Woodland Lodge K
RESTAURANTS & BARS
Ban Ko Jum Seafood 3
Coco Bar 4
Freedom Bar 5
Mama 2
Urban Café 1

only by the occasional discreet set of bungalows, and all but empty of people. Nights are also low-key: the bungalow generators mostly get turned off by 11pm, after which it's paraffin lamps and starlight.

The island is home to around 3000 people, the majority of them Muslim, though there are also communities of *chao ley* sea gypsies on Ko Jum (for more on the *chao ley* see p.370), as well as Buddhists. The main village is **Ban Ko Jum,** on the island's southeastern tip, comprising a few local shops and small restaurants, one of the island's two piers for boats to and from Laem Kruat on the mainland, and a beachfront school. It's about 1km from the southern end of the longest and most popular beach, called **Long Beach**. Long Beach is connected to **Golden Pearl Beach**, which sits just south of **Ban Ting Rai**, the middle-island village that's about halfway down the east coast. North of Ban Ting Rai, a trio of smaller, increasingly remote beaches at **Ao Si**, **Ao Ting Rai**, and **Ao Luboa** complete the picture. The island's third village, **Ban Ko Pu,** occupies the northeastern tip, about 5km beyond Ban Ting Rai, and has the other Laem Kruat ferry pier. Some islanders refer to the north of the island, from Ban Ting Rai upwards, as Ko Pu, and define only the south as Ko Jum. Much of the north is made inaccessible by the breastbone of forested hills, whose highest peak (422m) is Khao Ko Pu; the ten-kilometre road that connects the north and south of the island runs around its northeastern flank.

Very high winds and heavy seas mean that Ko Jum becomes an acquired taste from May to October, so most tourist accommodation **closes** for that period: exceptions are highlighted opposite. Many west-coast homes and bungalows were destroyed by the 2004 tsunami and the waves pelted the beaches with rocks and broken reef, but no lives were lost. The majority of property has since been rebuilt or relocated, and first-time visitors to the island are now unlikely to notice any major damage.

Island practicalities

During high season, access to Ko Jum is via the Krabi–Ko Lanta **ferries** (1hr 30min–2hr from Krabi, B300; or about 45min from Ko Lanta, B250; see p.430 for times); Ko Jum bungalows send longtails out to meet the ferries as they pass the west coast. When it comes to moving on, you can charter a longtail from Ko Jum to Ko Phi Phi for about B1300: the trip takes a couple of hours. In the **rainy season** you have to travel to Ko Jum overland, and this route is also a useful all-year alternative, for example if getting an early morning flight out of Krabi. Coming from Krabi town, you will first need to take a **songthaew** to **Nua Klong**, either direct from opposite *Viva* restaurant on Thanon Pruksa Uthit, or first to the Talat Kao bus station (to catch the last boat you need to leave Krabi by 1pm); at Nua Klong you get another songthaew to **Laem Kruat**; the total distance from Krabi is about 40km and can take nearly 2 hours. Three **boats** run daily from Laem Kruat **to Ban Ko Jum** in the southern part of the island, departing between noon and 3pm and returning from Ko Jum between 7am and 7.45am (1hr; B60); from Ban Ko Jum it's an easy 20- to 30-minute walk to the southern bungalows on Long Beach, or a motorbike taxi (with sidecar) will cost you B40–50. You can also get boats from Laem Kruat to **Ban Ko Pu** in the north (depart Laem Kruat when full between 8am and 4pm, returning from Ban Ko Pu between 7am and 8.30am; 45min; B20), from where you'll need a motorbike taxi to where you're staying.

Most bungalows can arrange **kayak** and **motorbike** rental (B250–350), and *Joy Bungalows* on Long Beach has bicycles. Many also organize **day-trips**, as do several tour agencies in the village, for example to Ko Phi Phi Don and Ko Phi Phi Leh for B2000 per boat. Or you can enlist a longtail boatmen to take you out to Bamboo Island for a day's snorkelling (about B1500).

There's no ATM on the island, but you can **change money** at Jum Island Travel next to the pier in Ban Ko Jum. The island **medical centre** is on the road just south of *Golden Pearl* bungalows, beyond the southern edge of Ban Ting Rai. For a comprehensive **guide** to life on the island and pictures of all the bungalow operations, see Ⓦwww.kohjumonline.com.

Long Beach and Ban Ko Jum

LONG BEACH (sometimes known as **Andaman Beach**), is the main backpackers' beach and was the first to offer tourist accommodation in the 1990s. It is indeed long – at least 1.5km – and large chunks of the shoreline are still uncultivated, backed with trees and wilderness, and well beyond sight of the island road. From *New Bungalow* at the southern end it's a 20-minute walk into Ban Ko Jum village.

There are two main clusters of **accommodation** on the beach. The southernmost place to stay is *New Bungalow* (Ⓣ075 618116; ②–④), which has 20 differently styled bungalows including a few cheapie bamboo ones with and without private bathrooms, a couple of treehouses with idyllic sea views and shared bathrooms, plus some plain, en-suite wooden huts. Next door, *Joy Bungalows* (Ⓣ075 618199, Ⓦwww.kohjum.com/joy; ②–⑧) is the longest running and most popular spot on the island, though not necessarily the friendliest. It has a huge range of bungalows – around forty in all – set in a peaceful stand of trees behind the shorefront, from ultra-basic bamboo huts with shared bathrooms through smart wood and concrete bungalows to deluxe two-storey villas. Only a few of the bungalows have electricity, so most rely on paraffin lanterns. Staff rent out kayaks (B600/day) and mountain bikes (B200/day).

North up the beach about 750m (a 15-minute walk), the British-Thai-run *Woodland Lodge* (Ⓣ081 893 5330, Ⓦwww.woodland-koh-jum.tk; ④–⑥) is a welcoming, peaceful spot and one of the few places on the island to stay open year-round. Its large, attractive bungalows are widely set beneath the trees of its shorefront garden and all have good bathrooms; the cheaper options have platform beds, varnished wooden floors and deep shady decks, while the pricier ones are more deluxe. Nearly all of them enjoy sea views between the trees. Next door to *Woodland*, the funky, ultra-cheap and ultra-basic *Bo Daeng* (Ⓣ081 494 8760; ①–②) is run by an effervescent family and appeals to long-stayers on a tiny budget. It offers bamboo huts with and without private bathrooms, plus some treehouses.

All the bungalows serve **food**: *Joy* does pizzas and fresh coffee, *Woodland* makes great curries, and *New* has newspapers to read while you wait for your meal. In **BAN KO JUM**, there's cheap village food at *Mama*, and seafood at *Ban Ko Jum seafood* beside the pier at the far end of the village road. On the beach south of *New*, the tiny driftwood beach-shack **bar** *Coco Bar* is run by the island postman, who plays good music and serves drinks till late, as does *Freedom Bar*, south a bit further down the beach.

Golden Pearl Beach

At its northern end, Long Beach segues into **GOLDEN PEARL BEACH**, which is about 750m/15 minutes' walk north up the beach from *Bo Daeng*, 5km by road from Ban Ko Jum and 1km south of Ban Ting Rai. Like Long Beach, it also has only a few bungalow outfits along its curving shoreline, though these are close by the island road.

Golden Pearl Beach is the site of the poshest **accommodation** on the island, the French-run *Koh Jum Lodge* (Ⓣ089 921 1621, Ⓦwww.kohjumlodge.com; ⑨, open all year), whose 15 thatched wooden rustic-chic chalets are both stylish and charming. Thoughtfully designed to make the most of the island breezes, they have doors onto the veranda to avoid the need for air-con, low beds and stylishly simple furniture. All the bungalows can sleep up to four kids as well as two adults. The resort has a small pool, Internet access, a TV and DVD area, a massage service and a restaurant. A few hundred metres further north up the beach, the 19 simple bamboo huts of eponymous *Golden Pearl Bungalows* (Ⓣ075 618131, ①–④) are set within a coconut grove across the road from the shore; the cheapest have shared bathrooms.

Ao Si

Around the rocky headland from Golden Pearl Beach, accessible in ten minutes at low tide or quite a bit further by road, **AO SI** is good for swimming. In the middle of the beach is *Coconut Green View Cottage* (Ⓣ084 088 8300; ②) whose 20 simple en-suite bamboo huts are pleasingly shaded beneath a coconut grove. Ao Si's northern headland is occupied by *Ao Si Bungalows* (Ⓣ081 747 2664, Ⓔreena.aosi@hotmail.com; ②–④), whose nine woven-bamboo, en-suite bungalows are built on piles up the side of the cliff and from their wraparound verandas offer commanding views of the bay and the southern half of the island.

Ban Ting Rai, Khao Ko Pu and Ao Ting Rai

The road begins to climb as soon as you leave Golden Pearl Beach, taking you up through the ribbon-like village of **BAN TING RAI**, pretty with bougainvillea and wooden houses, and location of a few small restaurants and noodle shops, including the humorously named *Urban Café*. **KHAO KO PU** which rises in the distance is, at 422m, the island's highest mountain and home to macaques who sometimes come down to forage on the rocks around the northern beaches; outside the rainy season, *OonLee* bungalows on Ao Ting Rai (see below) organizes treks up the eastern flank to the summit (about 1hr), from where the 360-degree panoramas encompass the entire island, the mainland and the outer islands (B500 including picnic lunch).

The little bay of **AO TING RAI**, sometimes known as **Hat Kidon**, has some nice places to stay, and good snorkelling off its shore, with reef to explore and plenty of fish. At low tide it's too rocky for swimming though, when you'll need instead to rent a kayak, or walk south 500m along the coastal track, to get to the isolated little sandy crescent known as both **Ao Thidiaw** and Magic Beach, which is swimmable at any tide. Ao Ting Rai is accessible via a **track** that runs off the main island road, a very pleasant half-hour walk (or 20 minutes from Ao Si) that mostly runs high above the shoreline, through forest and rubber plantations, offering pretty coastal views and long-range vistas that take in the distinctive outlines of Ko Phi Phi Leh, Ko Phi Phi Don and Bamboo Island.

The southernmost **accommodation** on Ao Ting Rai is at *Ting Rai Bay Resort* (Ⓣ087 277 7379; Ⓦwww.tingraibayresort.com; ③–④), where fourteen smallish bungalows are ranged up the sloping shorefront. Interiors are beautifully presented, with pretty floral bedspreads, four-poster style beds, and plenty of attention to detail. The food here is also good. Next door, *Old Lamp Bungalow* (Ⓣ089 876 8572, Ⓦwww.oldlampbungalows.com; ③–⑤; open all year) has a dozen surprisingly large and spacious bungalows made from coconut wood, secreted among the trees, and designed with thoughtful, practical touches; the pricier ones have nice garden bathrooms and all of them have big wooden beds. North again, the French-Thai-run *OonLee Bungalows* (Ⓣ087 200 8053, ⒺOonLee@hotmail.com; ②–④; phone ahead for a pick-up from your landing point; open all year) is a small, enthusiastically run place with seven bungalows in various styles, plus a four-bed family bungalow and a three-bedroom house with kitchen and living area (⑧). The wooden bungalows are especially well designed with plenty of storage, appealing bathrooms and sea-view verandas. Bungalows are stacked up the cliffside here, so there are quite a lot of steps; there's a stylish upper-level lounge area and restaurant and a bar and massage area at beach level, plus free kayaks and snorkels for guests. *OonLee* offers lots of organized **activities** and tours, including guided treks up Ko Pu (see opposite), fishing trips, day-trips to Ko Lola, the islet that lies just off the southern end of Long Beach, round-island tours and trips to Ko Phi Phi.

Ao Luboa

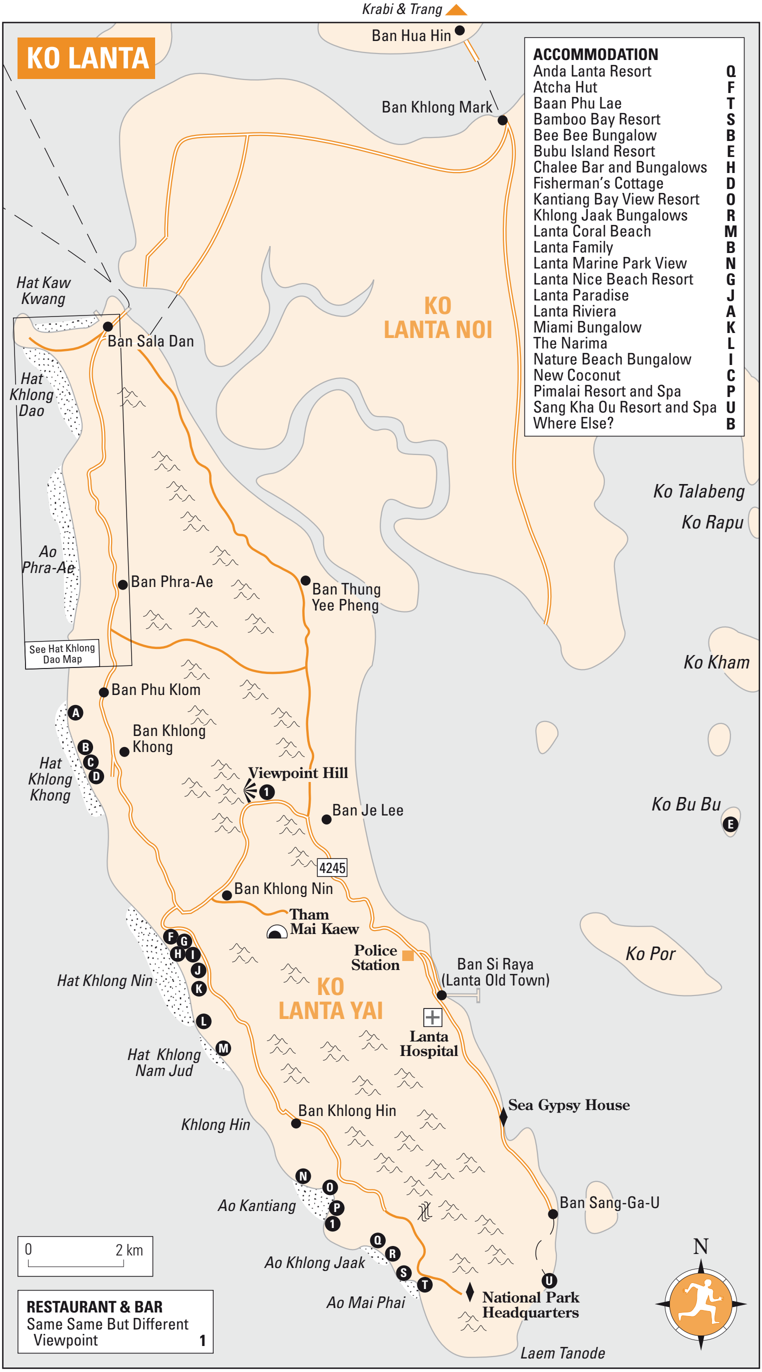
Ko Jum's northernmost beach, **AO LUBOA**, is for the time being remote and peaceful, accessed chiefly by a loop in the main island road that circles the north-eastern slopes of Khao Ko Pu and terminates at the north end of the bay, though at low tide you can also trudge here over the rocks from Ao Ting Rai in about half an hour (better to take a kayak). However, there are plans to extend the coastal road from Ao Ting Rai, which will make things easier. Like Ao Ting Rai, Ao Luboa's shorefront reef gets exposed at low tide, making it impossible to swim, though at high water things are fine and it's anyway a supremely quiet, laid-back beach with just a few **bungalows**. The friendly *Luboa Hut* (ⓣ081 388 9241, ⓦwww.toensberg.com/luboahut; ②–③, family huts ⑤) has just half a dozen simple en-suite bamboo bungalows with sea view, a couple of which can sleep four; the owners do kayak and motorbike rental and their restaurant has a reputation for good food. At the far northern end of the beach, *Bonhomie Beach Cottages* (ⓣ081 844 9069, ⓦwww.geocities.com/bonhomiebeach; ②–⑤) has attractively designed en-suite wooden chalets, many with sea view.

Ko Lanta Yai

Although **KO LANTA YAI** can't compete with Phi Phi's stupendous scenery, the thickly forested 25-kilometre-long island is graced with plenty of fine sandy beaches and safe seas and offers an ever increasing number of places to stay. Encouragingly, development has been more considered and regulated here than on many other fast-growing island destinations (Ko Chang being a case in point), and local laws prohibiting jet-skis, beachfront parasols and girlie bars have had positive effect. Add to that a growing number of day-trip options offered by the island's ubiquitous tour agents and it's no surprise that many tourists are now basing themselves on Ko Lanta for their entire holiday fortnight.

The majority of Ko Lanta Yai's ten thousand indigenous residents are mixed-blood Muslim descendants of Chinese-Malay and *chao ley* peoples and most have traditionally supported themselves by fishing and cultivating the land, though the recent tourist boom has had a big impact on island job opportunities. The local *chao ley* name for the island is *Pulao Satak*, "Island of Long Beaches", an apt description of the string of silken **beaches** along the western coast, each separated by rocky points and strung out at quite wide intervals. All the bungalow outfits advertise snorkelling trips to the reefs off Ko Lanta's myriad satellite islands, and diving is also popular. Ko Lanta's mangrove-fringed **east coast** is unsuitable for swimming but ideal for kayaking and there's cultural and scenic interest here too, particularly in Lanta Old Town, the island's most historic settlement and at the nearby *chao ley* cultural centre. Lanta Yai's sister island of **Ko Lanta Noi**, north across a narrow channel from the port at Ban Sala Dan, has Ko Lanta's administrative offices and several small villages but no tourist accommodation, and is

KO LANTA



Krabi & Trang
Ko Jum & Krabi
Ko Phi Phi, Ao Nang & Phuket
Ban Hua Hin
Ban Khlong Mark
Hat Kaw Kwang
Ban Sala Dan
Hat Khlong Dao
KO LANTA NOI
Ao Phra-Ae
Ban Phra-Ae
Ban Thung Yee Pheng
See Hat Khlong Dao Map
Ban Phu Klom
Ban Khlong Khong
Hat Khlong Khong
Viewpoint Hill
Ban Je Lee
4245
Ban Khlong Nin
Tham Mai Kaew
Police Station
Ban Si Raya (Lanta Old Town)
Hat Khlong Nin
KO LANTA YAI
Lanta Hospital
Hat Khlong Nam Jud
Sea Gypsy House
Khlong Hin
Ban Khlong Hin
Ao Kantiang
Ban Sang-Ga-U
Ao Khlong Jaak
Ao Mai Phai
National Park Headquarters
Laem Tanode
Ko Talabeng
Ko Rapu
Ko Kham
Ko Bu Bu
Ko Por
N
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2 km

ACCOMMODATION

Anda Lanta Resort	Q
Atcha Hut	F
Baan Phu Lae	T
Bamboo Bay Resort	S
Bee Bee Bungalow	B
Bubu Island Resort	E
Chalee Bar and Bungalows	H
Fisherman's Cottage	D
Kantiang Bay View Resort	O
Khlong Jaak Bungalows	R
Lanta Coral Beach	M
Lanta Family	B
Lanta Marine Park View	N
Lanta Nice Beach Resort	G
Lanta Paradise	J
Lanta Riviera	A
Miami Bungalow	K
The Narima	L
Nature Beach Bungalow	I
New Coconut	C
Pimalai Resort and Spa	P
Sang Kha Ou Resort and Spa	U
Where Else?	B

RESTAURANT & BAR

Same Same But Different	
Viewpoint	1

△ Ban Sala Dan, Ko Lanta Yai

generally only visited on kayaking tours or in transit if driving to Ko Lanta Yai from the mainland. The rest of the Ko Lanta archipelago, which comprises over fifty little islands, is mostly uninhabited.

Every March the island celebrates its cultural mix at the Laanta Lanta Festival, which is held over three days in the heart of Lanta Old Town on the east coast and features traditional dancing and music, plus food stalls and crafts for sale (check Ⓦ www.kolanta.net for dates and specifics). Traditional *chao ley* rituals are celebrated on Ko Lanta twice a year, usually in June and November (see p.480 for details). Music is also central to the three annual **festivals** staged by the *Reggae House* bar on the beach at Ao Phra-Ae. These events last for about three days each and are as laid-back, alternative and organic as the bar that sponsors them (for more on which, see p.475). Their season of events begins in December with a World Music festival featuring musicians from all over; in early February there's more music of a similar bent at the Ko Lanta Peace and Love Festival; and in early March the highlight of the Country Music Festival is performances by *chao ley* musicians. For dates and details, you'll need to ask at *Reggae House*.

Transport to Ko Lanta Yai

The principal mainland gateways to Ko Lanta are Krabi, Phuket and Trang, all of which have airports; Trang also has a train station (see relevant accounts for travel information). From mid-October to mid-May there are **ferries** to Ban Sala Dan on the northern tip of Ko Lanta Yai from **Krabi** (2 daily; 2hr 30min; B300; return from Ko Lanta Yai at 8am & 1pm), via Ko Jum (B250, about 45min). From November to May ferries also run to Sala Dan from **Ko Phi Phi** (2 daily; 1hr 30min; B300; return from Ko Lanta Yai at 8am & 1pm), with journeys from **Phuket** also using this service and connecting on Phi Phi (2 daily; 4hr 30min; B650–700; return from Ko Lanta Yai at 8 & 1pm). Boats from **Ao Nang** also operate from November to May (1 daily; 2hr 30min; B380; return from Ko Lanta Yai at 1.30pm) and run via West Railay on **Laem Phra Nang** (2hr; B380). Bungalow touts always meet the boats at Ban Sala Dan and transport you to the beach of your choice. There is also an **overland route**, which is used year-round by minivans

Diving, snorkelling, kayaking and day-trips on Ko Lanta

Ko Lanta is a significant diving centre, with local reefs quieter and more pristine than those round Phi Phi and Phuket, and an excellent place for seeing whale sharks. The diving season runs from November to April, and a few dive shops continue to run successful trips in May and June; outside these months the seas are usually too rough to travel on, especially during September and October. All dive boats depart from Ban Sala Dan, and nearly all dive courses are taught either in Sala Dan or on Hat Khlong Dao, though there are dive shops on every beach.

Some of Lanta's best **dive sites** are located between Ko Lanta and Ko Phi Phi, including the soft coral at **Hin Bidah**, where you get lots of leopard sharks, barracuda and tuna. West and south of Lanta, the **Ko Ha** island group offers four different dives on each of its five islands, including steep drop-offs and an "underwater cathedral" and other caves; visibility is often very good. Much further south, about four hours' boat ride, there's a fifty-metre wall at spectacular **Hin Daeng** and **Hin Muang**, plus a good chance of seeing tuna, jacks, silvertip sharks, manta rays and even whale sharks. See the descriptions of Andaman coast dive sites on p.409 for more on some of these reefs. A typical **day-trip** to some of these reefs costs B2400–3000, including two tanks but excluding equipment rental, with accompanying snorkellers charged about B1200; all dive centres offer discounts if you do three consecutive one-day dives. For an overnight expedition to local islands with accommodation either on the boat or on one of the islands, and six tanks, you pay about B7500. Diving **courses** average out at B12,750 for the four-day Openwater course, or B9500 for the two-day Advanced course.

All Ko Lanta **dive shops** have their headquarters in the village of Ban Sala Dan, and many also have branch offices on the beaches; nearly all of them close from May to October. Two of the best include the long-established Ko Lanta Diving Centre, which is German-run and has its HQ on the west arm of Ban Sala Dan's seafront road, plus a branch office on central Hat Khlong Dao (ⓣ075 684065, ⓦwww.kohlantadivingcenter.com); and the Swedish-owned, PADI Five-star Instructor Development Centre, Lanta Diver, located just before the Ban Sala Dan T-junction and with branch offices at *Twin Lotus* and *Lanta Noble House* on Hat Khlong Dao, at *Ozone Bar* and *Lanta Sands* on Ao Phra-Ae, and at *Lanta Paradise* on Hat Khlong Nin (ⓣ081 271 9050, ⓦwww.lantadiver.com). The nearest **recompression chambers** are located on Phuket (see p.408); check to see that your dive operator is insured to use one of them, and see Basics p.57 for more information on diving in Thailand.

from **Trang** (4 daily; 3hr; return vans depart Ban Sala Dan at 8am and noon; B250), minivans from **Krabi town** (hourly; 2hr; B200; these vans should drop you at your requested accommodation anywhere between Ban Sala Dan and the Klong Nin junction en route to the terminus in Lanta Old Town) and by anyone bringing their own vehicle. It's also the only route open during the **rainy season**. Overland access is via Ban Hua Hin on the mainland, 75km east of Krabi, from where a small ferry crosses to Ban Khlong Mark on Ko Lanta Noi, after which there's a seven-kilometre drive across to Lanta Noi's southwest tip, then another ferry over the narrow channel to Ban Sala Dan on Ko Lanta Yai; both ferries run approximately every twenty minutes from about 7am to 10pm and cost B50 per car per leg. Most Ko Lanta travel agents can fix you up with an onward bus or air ticket **to Bangkok** or elsewhere and some can also organize train tickets, though this will take several days and cost quite a bit extra. Several also offer **visa-run** day-trips to Satun for about B1000.

Snorkelling, kayaking and other day-trips

The best and most popular snorkelling outing is to the islands of **Ko Rok Nai** and **Ko Rok Nok**, forested twins that are graced with stunning white-sand beaches and accessible waterfalls and separated by a narrow channel full of fabulous shallow reefs. The islands are 47km south of Ko Lanta and served by speedboats (1hr; B1400) that can be booked through most tour agents, or direct with Lanta Garden Hill Speed Boat (Ⓣ075 684042, Ⓦwww.lantaislandtours.com). The other very popular day-trip is to four islands off the Trang coast (see p.494 for island descriptions): the enclosed emerald lagoon on the island of **Ko Mook** (aka Ko Muk), nearby **Ko Hai** (Ko Ngai), **Ko Cheuak** (Ko Chuk) and **Ko Kradan**. Though the islands are beautiful, and the coral passable, these trips are large-scale outings in boats that can hold around a hundred passengers, so the sites get very crowded: tickets cost about B850 per person, including snorkelling gear, lunch and national park entry fee. You may find it more rewarding to organize a private longtail-boat tour to the better reefs off the **Ko Ha** island group, described under “diving”, above (about two hours’ boat ride southwest of Lanta), with snorkelling or fishing as requested: enthusiastic angler Jack, of Ko Lanta Tour at *Lanta Villa* on Hat Khlong Dao (Ⓣ081 538 4099, Ⓔlantajack2000@yahoo.com), charges B4000 per boat carrying up to four people, or he also arranges speedboat trips there which cost B10,000 for up to eight people. Another option is a day-trip by speedboat to Phi Phi Don, Phi Phi Leh and Bamboo Island, for snorkelling, sunbathing and shopping (B1400, kids B700).

There are several rewarding **kayaking** destinations, rich in mangroves and caves, around Ko Lanta Yai’s east coast and around Ko Lanta Noi and its eastern islands, including **Ko Talabeng** and **Ko Bubu**; a few companies also offer kayak-snorkel trips to the four islands described above. Trips can be arranged through tour operators in Ban Sala Dan, and on most beaches, for B750–1200 per person (kids B550–600): Seaborn Ventures (Ⓣ075 684696) is considered one of the best operators.

Day-trips inland

Ko Lanta’s biggest inland attraction is the **Tham Mai Kaew caves**, described on p.479. Though it’s not much more than a trickle, the **waterfall** inland from Ao Khlong Jaak is another fairly popular spot, and can be reached from the bay by walking along the course of the stream for about two hours. Alternatively join one of the tours that combine visits to the caves and the waterfall in a half-day trip for about B500, or B950 with an **elephant-ride** thrown in. Mr Yat’s Lanta On Beach Travel and Tour on Ao Phra-Ae (Ⓣ089 021 1924) does **horse-riding lessons** on the beach for B650/hr.

Island practicalities

A decent road runs almost the entire length of Ko Lanta Yai’s west coast, as far as the *Pimalai Resort* on Ao Kantiang, beyond which it degenerates into a potholed track. There’s no public **transport** on the island, so many people hire a motorbike, available in Ban Sala Dan and from most accommodation (about B40/hour, B250/day; B500/day for a big trailbike); a few Ban Sala Dan agents also rent jeeps (B1200/day). An organized **motorbike taxi** plus sidecar service operates out of Ban Sala Dan, from a stand opposite the 7–11: its per-passenger rates are B30 to Hat Khlong Dao, B40–50 to Ao Phra-Ae, B70 to Hat Khlong Kong, or B120 for a trip to Hat Khlong Nin and B250 to Ao Kantiang. Most bungalows charge similar rates. If you’re staying on Hat Khlong Dao it’s an easy half-hour walk to the village.

Most bungalows will **change money**, though you’ll get the best rates at the bank in Ban Sala Dan, where there are also a couple of **ATMS**; there are also

ATMs beside the road at most of the beaches. Many bungalows offer international telephone services for guests, and there are **Internet** centres in Ban Sala Dan, and on Hat Khlong Dao and Ao Phra-Ae (B2/min). The post office is in Lanta Old Town. Nearly every beach has a **clinic** in among its roadside development, there's a health centre in Ban Sala Dan (variable hours, often Mon–Fri 4.30–8.30pm, and Sat & Sun 8.30am–4.30pm) and the island hospital is in Lanta Old Town (ⓣ075 697017), though for anything serious you'll need to go to Phuket. The **police** station is also in Lanta Old Town (ⓣ075 697085), though there's a police box in Sala Dan (ⓣ075 684657). *Time for Lime* bungalows on Hat Khlong Dao runs a **cookery school**, described on p.472.

Ko Lanta Yai is extremely popular during **high season** (Nov–Feb), when it's well worth either booking your first night's accommodation in advance or taking up the suggestions of the bungalow touts who ride the boats from the mainland. **Accommodation pricing** on Ko Lanta is extremely flexible and alters according to the number of tourists on the island: bungalow rates can triple between mid-December and mid-January, while during the **rainy season** between May and October rates are vastly discounted and the seas become too rough for boats to get here from Krabi (some places close for this period and these are highlighted in the reviews). The price range shown in our Ko Lanta accommodation listings are for the beginning and end of high season (generally Nov to early Dec & late Jan to April).

Ban Sala Dan

During high season, direct boats from Krabi and Phi Phi arrive at the fishing port and village of **BAN SALA DAN**, located on the northernmost tip of Ko Lanta Yai. It's essentially a T-junction village, with about fifty shops and businesses, including banks with currency **exchange** and ATMs, minimarkets that sell all the essentials, and half a dozen tour operators offering day-trips (see box on p.469 for a guide to destinations), as well as boat, bus, train and air tickets, and bike and jeep rental. A shop near *Seaside* restaurant has a couple of bicycles for rent.

While you're in the village, it's well worth stopping for a breezy meal at one of the **restaurants** whose dining area juts out on a shaded jetty right over the water, giving enjoyable views of the fishing boats and Ko Lanta Noi. *Ko Lanta Seafood* on the left-hand arm of the T is the oldest restaurant in town and the most highly rated – its seafood is great, worth braving the service which is lackadaisical at best. Also near here are wood-fired pizzas at *Ko Lanta Pizzeria*, next to the police box. Along the right-hand arm of the T, both *Seaside* and the nearby *Sea View* have good, very inexpensive menus offering authentic Thai dishes from chicken with cashew nuts to fish fried with chilli or garlic. Also here are the similar *Catfish*, which sells art cards and second-hand books categorized by genre, as well as food; *Green Bay*, which sells bagels, pastries and the like; and *Bai Fern*, which does noodles.

Hat Khlong Dao

Lanta Yai's longest and most popular beach is **HAT KHLONG DAO**, the northernmost of the west-coast beaches, about half an hour's walk from Ban Sala Dan, or 2–3km by road. The sand here is soft and golden, the sunsets can be magnificent, and the whole is framed by a dramatic hilly backdrop. Despite being developed to capacity, the beach is long and broad enough never to feel overcrowded and as it's flat and safe for swimming it's very popular with families. The northern curve of Hat Khlong Dao juts out into a rocky promontory known as **Laem Kaw**

Kwang (Deer Neck Cape), whose north-facing shore, **Hat Kaw Kwang**, is mainly characterized by mud flats and mangroves and is home to a *chao ley* settlement.

There are a few small minimarts and tour agencies on the beach and dive shops at several of the bungalows. Ko Lanta Tour at *Lanta Villa* does recommended fishing trips as well as other boat tours (see box on p.469). You can rent motorbikes at several places along the road, including at the bike showroom on the road behind *Andaman Lanta Resort*; they also have a couple of bicycles for rent (B100/day).

Accommodation

Accommodation on Khlong Dao is predominantly mid-market, with just a couple of options in the ②–④ brackets and a few notable top-end places; none is more than 100m from the sea.

Cha-Ba Bungalows ⓣ075 684118, ⓦwww.krabidir.com/chababungalows. Just fifteen cute, brightly painted fan and air-con bungalows in a compound that's enlivened by creatively kitsch concrete sculptures and bright blue Flintstone walls and archways. Interiors are pretty simple and flimsy but all are en suite and each bungalow has its own little shrub-garden screen out front. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑥

Costa Lanta ⓣ075 684630, ⓦwww.costalanta.com. You're either going to love or hate this ultra-brutal minimalist grouping of 22 polished-grey concrete boxes, each module containing an unadorned bedroom all in grey and white and a similarly-styled bathroom. The setting is less than magnificent – a dry, plain garden bisected by greenish khlongs – but there's a biggish pool, a striking bar-restaurant and DVD players in every room. ⑨

Hans ⓣ075 684152, ⓦwww.krabidir.com/hansrestaurant. Small, inexpensive outfit that's the cheapest on this beach, where the thirteen huts are ranged in a little strip garden behind the shorefront restaurant. Choose between simple, rickety bamboo bungalows with mosquito nets, and better-furnished wooden versions with screened windows. Closed from early April to October. ②–④

Kaw Kwang Beach Resort At the northernmost end of Khlong Dao on the deer neck itself ⓣ075 684462, ⓦwww.kawkwangbeachresort.com. Welcoming, family-run outfit of 55 rooms occupying a beachfront garden in a nice secluded position beneath the still-wooded nose of the headland, on land between the deer neck's two shores. There's a big range of options here, from decent en-suite wood and concrete huts among the trees above the shore, through bigger, more comfortable air-con bungalows on the shorefront, plus some deluxe air-con ones with uninterrupted sea views. Also has family bungalows and a pool. Open all year with fifty percent discounts from June to Oct. Fan ②–④, air-con ⑥–⑧

Laguna Beach Club ⓣ075 684172, ⓦwww.laguna-beach-club.com. European-managed place that has half a dozen different types of accommodation, all of it thoughtfully designed and tastefully kitted out with northern Thai furniture. The cheapest options are fan-cooled bungalows, the priciest are air-con rooms in a three-storey block, where there's even a two-roomed penthouse suite. Also has a swimming pool and dive centre. Closed June–Sept. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑦, penthouse ⑨

Lanta Noble House ⓣ075 684096, ⓦwww.lantanoblehouse.com. Quite small, Swiss-run place where the 23 inviting fan and air-con bungalows have big glass windows and bath tubs. They're set in facing rows, mostly around the little swimming pool. Also has a dive centre. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑦

Lanta Villa ⓣ075 684129, ⓦwww.lantavillaresort.com. A big collection of comfortably furnished, decent-sized wooden bungalows, set in a garden running back from the shore, many with air-con and TV, and some with sea view. Also has a swimming pool, Internet access and a good restaurant. ⑥–⑧

Southern Lanta Resort ⓣ075 684175, ⓦwww.southernlanta.com. One of the biggest hotels on the beach, offering dozens of very spacious air-con bungalows set at decent intervals around a garden of shrubs, clipped hedges and shady trees. There's a good-sized swimming pool too. Good value considering the competition, and popular with families and package tourists. ⑦

Time for Lime ⓣ075 684590, ⓦwww.timeforlime.net. Just eight peacefully located, understated, fan-cooled, en-suite bungalows attached to a cooking school at the rocky, far southern end of the beach. The style is plain but comfortable, there are hammocks on every veranda and a pretty, narrow garden to gaze at, though there are no views. Closed mid-June–early Nov. ④–⑤

Twin Lotus Resort and Spa ⓣ075 60700, ⓦwww.twinlotusresort.com. An upscale collection of 78 chic, single-storey bungalows set quite closely together around a grassy garden between the shore and the road. Though the restaurant design is strikingly contemporary, it's all softer than its uncompromising neighbour *Costa Lanta* and there's a tempting pool (which is sometimes open to non-guests who eat at the restaurant), spa and fitness centre. ⑨

Eating and drinking

All the bungalows have **restaurants** serving tourist fare and standard Thai dishes, and at night they're lit up with fairy lights and low lanterns, which lends a nice mellow atmosphere to the evenings. Many offer fresh seafood barbecues at night: those at *Lanta Villa* are popular and good. *Hans* is known for its German-style fillet steaks, creamy coconut curries and barbecued meats, while *Banana Beach* also serves good curries, as well as cocktails and ice creams. Further south, *Don's Restaurant and Bar* does a tasty line in steaks and pizzas, as well as Thai soups, and plays an eclectic mix of tunes, from funk to house. The Norwegian-run *Time for Lime* serves breakfasts and imaginative lunchtime sandwiches, and plans to open for night-time meals, with changing menus nightly, but is mainly known for its highly rated **cookery school** (Ⓣ075 684590, Ⓦwww.timeforlime.net), whose workshops take place in the modern open-plan kitchen behind the bar (Tues–Sun afternoons and evenings; from B1400 including meal).

Clusters of little beach **bars** dot the shoreline. In the centre of the beach, behind *Cha-Ba Bungalows*, there's *Picasso Bar and Easy Bar*, while further south, near *Lanta Garden Home*, you'll find the pleasingly chilled-out *Bomp Bar*, with cushions, deckchairs and low tables spread out on the sand, a campfire, and decent music. Several hundred metres further south, beyond *Don's*, *Time for Lime* stirs a mean mojito at its chic beachfront bar.

Ao Phra-Ae (Long Beach)

A couple of kilometres south of Khlong Dao, **AO PHRA-AE** (also known as **Long Beach**) boasts a beautiful long strip of soft white sand, with calm, crystal-clear water that's good for swimming, some shady casuarinas, and some clusters of little bars, in particular the famous *Reggae House*, which holds regular parties with live music and also stages three big music festivals a year. Traveller-oriented bamboo huts are available, but the trend is upmarket, with a growing number of quite swanky hotels occupying the central beach. The main stretch of the beach is divided from the southern rocky extremity by a shallow, easily wadeable khlong; *Lanta Marina Resort* marks the far southern end of the beach. All bungalows on Ao Phra-Ae rent out **motorbikes** for around B250 a day and organize boat trips for snorkelling and fishing. There's a roadside clinic and ATM near *Red Snapper* restaurant.

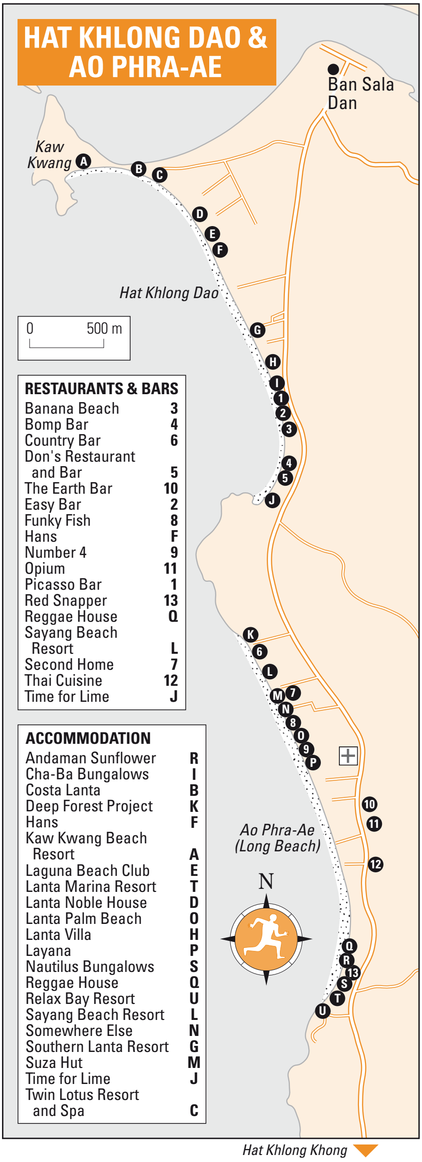
Accommodation

Andaman Sunflower Ⓣ085 222 1027. Two-dozen simple, well-priced bamboo huts of varying sizes but all with mosquito nets and private bathrooms. Right next to *Reggae House*, at the rocky, far southern end of the beach, so you may need to be in the mood to party. Closed June–Oct. ②

Deep Forest Project At the northernmost end of the beach Ⓣ075 684247, Ⓦwww.deepforestlanta.4T.com. Eleven plain, old-style huts, sold at old-style prices, and all equipped with mosquito net, fan and en-suite bathroom but not much else. Closed during low season. ②

Lanta Marina Resort Ⓣ075 684168. At the far southern end of Ao Phra-Ae, inland from a rocky point, this friendly little place has just 13 shaggily thatched wood-and-split-bamboo bungalows facing the sea, connected by a wooden walkway that circles a little patch of wilderness. Huts vary in size but all have nice beds, and many have well-designed bathrooms. ②–③

Lanta Palm Beach Ⓣ075 684406, Ⓦwww.lantapalmbeachresort.com. A busy and popular spot that has a range of different bungalows, plus Internet access, and is within stumbling distance of several beach bars. Cheapest are the bamboo


HAT KHLONG DAO & AO PHRA-AE
Ban Sala Dan
Kaw Kwang
Hat Khlong Dao
Ao Phra-Ae (Long Beach)
Hat Khlong Khong
0 500 m
N
RESTAURANTS & BARS
Banana Beach 3
Bomp Bar 4
Country Bar 6
Don's Restaurant and Bar 5
The Earth Bar 10
Easy Bar 2
Funky Fish 8
Hans F
Number 4 9
Opium 11
Picasso Bar 1
Red Snapper 13
Reggae House Q
Sayang Beach Resort L
Second Home 7
Thai Cuisine 12
Time for Lime J
ACCOMMODATION
Andaman Sunflower R
Cha-Ba Bungalows I
Costa Lanta B
Deep Forest Project K
Hans F
Kaw Kwang Beach Resort A
Laguna Beach Club E
Lanta Marina Resort T
Lanta Noble House D
Lanta Palm Beach O
Lanta Villa H
Layana P
Nautilus Bungalows S
Reggae House Q
Relax Bay Resort U
Sayang Beach Resort L
Somewhere Else N
Southern Lanta Resort G
Suza Hut M
Time for Lime J
Twin Lotus Resort and Spa C

huts with bathrooms, good beds and mosquito nets – they're set on the edge of a dry shorefront lawn in the scant remains of a coconut grove and enjoy a full view of the sea. The pricier concrete bungalows sit back from the shore, within a garden of neat clipped hedges, and come with fan or air-con. Bamboo ③, concrete ⑤, air-con ⑥

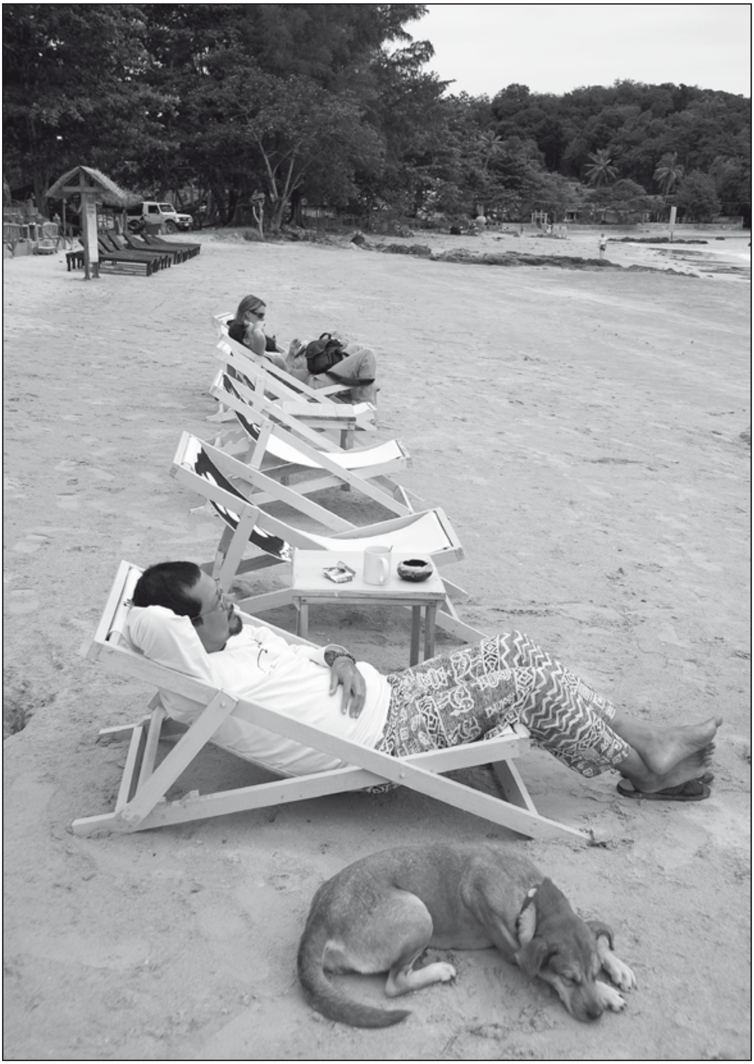
Layana ⓣ075 607100, ⓦwww.layanaresort.com. Located plumb in the middle of the beach, this is currently the top spot on Ao Phra-Ae. Its fifty posh air-con rooms occupy chunky, two-storey villas designed in modern-Thai style and are set around a tidy beachfront garden of lawns and shrubs; the priciest have sea views. There's a gorgeous shorefront salt-water infinity pool and a spa. Published rates from B9000. ⑨

Nautilus Bungalows ⓣ084 994 9848, ⓔnautiluslanta@hotmail.com. A cute spot at the far southern, rocky, end of the bay, where the dozen attractive wooden chalets all have big glass windows, thick mattresses and open-roofed bathrooms and come with either air-con or fan. Also has a small spa and massage service. Fan ④, air-con ⑤

Reggae House One of Lanta's funkiest institutions, the *Reggae House* live music bar and jamming centre (see p.475) attracts laid-back musos and chilled travellers to its half a dozen primitive, almost circular, en-suite brick huts. Interiors are bare bones, but it's one of the cheapest spots on the island. ①

Relax Bay Resort ⓣ075 684194, ⓦwww.relaxbay.com. Set in its own tiny bay south around the next rocky point (and quite a hike) from *Lanta Marina*, the style of this French-managed place is affordable rustic chic. The nicest accommodation is in tastefully simple bamboo and wood bungalows, all of which have large sea-view decks, fans and open-air bathrooms. Also has a few less-interesting concrete air-con bungalows. ⑤–⑧

Sayang Beach Resort ⓣ075 684156, ⓔsayangbeach@hotmail.com. Very welcoming, family-run mid-range boutique-style operation occupying expansive shorefront grounds with bungalows nicely spaced among the palm trees. All 30 bungalows are stylishly decorated with batik furnishings, Thai-chic accessories, and a tasteful wood and bamboo finish. Price depends on location and size, and whether or not you want air-con. Also



△ Hat Khlong Dao, Ko Lanta Yai

has some family bungalows and a beachfront suite. Prices include large breakfasts. Fan ⑥, air-con ⑧

Somewhere Else Ⓣ081 536 0858. Located in the heart of the liveliest part of Ao Phra-Ae, with beach bars left, right and seaward, this little outfit has just sixteen spacious, unusually designed hexagonal bungalows made of tightly woven bamboo and with pretty bathrooms. Price depends on the size. The drawback is that most are close together and lack a sense of privacy, though many have sea views. Run by the same family as *Where Else?* bungalows on Hat Khlong Khong. ②–⑤

Suza Hut Ⓣ081 577 2210, Ⓔsuzahutlanta@gmail.com. Some of the cheapest accommodation on the beach, in a handful of rudimentary bamboo huts furnished with nothing more than a mattress and a mosquito net, though some have their own bathrooms. Closed during low season. ②–④

Eating and drinking

Ao Phra-Ae's best **restaurants** are along the road, and this is also where you'll find some of the bigger, high-profile **bars**, favourite haunts of expats. Down on the beach you get small, mellow drinking spots.

Country Bar On the beach in front of *Sayang Beach* bungalows. Mellow little bar at the far northern end of the beach, with Thai-style cushion seating, and chairs, set around a bar hung with fairy lights. Nightly from about 6pm.

The Earth Bar On the road, inland from *Layana Resort*. Sophisticated, open-sided bar and club with ambient lighting, lounging mats and cushions, and a long list of DJs and regular parties. Very popular with expats and dive-shop staff. Nightly from 6pm.

Funky Fish On the beach, next to *Somewhere Else* bungalows. One of the most famous bars on the beach: renowned for pizzas, cocktails and a quality sound system. You can get massages here too.

Number 4 On the beach just south of *Lanta Palm* bungalows. Small, laid-back spot that serves food and drink, best enjoyed from the cushions scattered around the roof terrace.

Opium On the road, inland from *Layana Resort*. Next door to *Earth Bar* and run along similar lines, this long-established bar and club plays lots of dance music, holds regular special events and is a popular meeting place for island expats. It has a good-sized dance floor – and a long bar overlooking it for watching the moves – plus an outdoor pool table and garden seating. Nightly from 6pm.

Red Snapper On the road, inland from *Andaman Sunflower* bungalows at the southern end of Phra-Ae. Tapas and creative European cuisine are the hallmarks of this highly rated Dutch-run restaurant and bar, where the mid-priced menu changes every couple of months. Nightly from 6pm.

Reggae House On the shorefront, next to *Andaman Sunflower* bungalows. An island institution, this place is the brainchild of Thai selecta DJ Pirate, whose wacky imagination is behind the grown-up tree house of a bar-building, cobbled together from driftwood and timber and continually evolving. It stages parties around twice a week and frequent live music events, including three big music festivals every year (see p.467) featuring local famous musicians such as southern Thai reggae band Job to Do, as well as *chao ley* musicians. On quieter nights DJs play mainly reggae and dub. Closed every September. Nightly from about 6pm.

Sayang Beach Resort On the beach, at *Sayang Beach Resort*. This is a lovely spot for dinner, with tables set out under shoreside casuarinas strung with fairylights. The kitchen here has a tandoori oven and serves a long, mid-priced menu of authentic Indian dishes, including sheesh and dhal, as well as Thai and western food, plus fresh seafood nightly (seafood hotplate B160) and a big veggie menu.

Second Home On the beach, next to *Suza Hut*. A good choice for fresh fish – barbecued or fried; the fried red snapper with three styles of Thai sauce is especially tasty (from B100).

Thai Cuisine On the road, inland from *Layana Resort*, towards the southern end of Phra-Ae. Very popular outdoor place that serves some of the most authentic Thai food on the island (B60–150), from thick *matsaman* curries to fiery *kway tiaw phat kii maew* (drunkard's fried noodles, so called because the liberal use of chilli is meant to sober you up). Also has plenty of seafood plus some more unusual choices including a surprisingly delicious rice fried with banana. Nightly from 6pm.

Hat Khlong Khong

The lovely long beach at **HAT KHLONG KHONG**, 2km south of Ao Phra-Ae's *Relax Bay Resort*, is peppered with rocks and only really swimmable at high tide, though the snorkelling is good. The shore is lined with predominantly traveller-oriented bungalows, including some of the most creatively designed and characterful spots on the island. Many of them are reasonably priced, and there are quite a number of funky little beach-bars too, including the laid-back *Feeling Bar* at *Where Else?* bungalows, which is decorated with driftwood sculptures and has a pool table, the more sophisticated Bangkok-by-the-beach *FMCK Beach Club* bar at *Fisherman's Cottage*, with leather-look sofas and occasional DJ parties, and the beachfront *Monkey Bar at New Coconut* bungalows.

Accommodation

Bee Bee Bungalow Ⓣ081 537 9932, Ⓔbeebeepiya02@hotmail.com. A great spot that stands out from other places on the beach because of its eleven highly individual huts, each of which is a charmingly idiosyncratic experiment in bamboo architecture. All the bungalows are comfortably furnished and have fans, mosquito nets and open-air bathrooms; some have an upstairs room as well. Closed mid-May–early Oct. ②–④

Fisherman's Cottage Ⓣ081 476 1529, Ⓦwww.fishermanscottage.biz. This quiet, low-key place at the southern end of the beach has just ten bungalows, each with big glass windows, idiosyncratic if mostly quite spartan furnishings, mosquito nets and decent bathrooms. Closed July–Oct. ②–⑤

Lanta Family Ⓣ075 648310, Ⓔdumsupaporn@yahoo.com.sg. Commercially minded place whose seventeen en-suite fan-cooled bungalows are ranged in rows under the palm trees. The cheapest options are split-bamboo huts at the back of the compound; larger, pricier bamboo and brick versions sit nearer the sea. ②–④

Lanta Riviera Ⓣ075 684300, Ⓦwww.lantariviera.com. There are rows and rows of good, standard-issue, comfortably furnished fan and air-con concrete bungalows here, set among shady beds of shrubs and flowers at the far northern end of the beach. Many of the rooms sleep three so it's popular with families. Also has a small pool near the shore. Fan ⑤, air-con ⑦

New Coconut Ⓣ081 537 7590, Ⓔlantamaster@hotmail.com. Twenty simple, en-suite, split-bamboo fan-cooled bungalows in a garden. ②

Where Else? Ⓣ081 536 4870, Ⓔwhereelse_lanta@yahoo.com. As you might expect from the name, this charming collection of 22 bungalows has a relaxed, laid-back atmosphere and lots of personality. The individually designed bamboo and coconut-wood bungalows all have fans, mosquito nets and open-air bathrooms filled with plants, and there are shell mobiles, driftwood sculptures and pot plants all over the place. The pricier bungalows are larger and nearer the sea, and some even have sunroofs and turrets. The restaurant is also a work of art, hung with banners, shells, textile art and more. ④–⑤

South to Hat Khlong Nin

About four kilometres south of Hat Khlong Khong the road forks at kilometrestone 13, at the edge of the village of **Ban Khlong Nin**. The left-hand, eastbound arm runs across to Ko Lanta Yai's east coast, via the caves and viewpoint, and is covered on p.478. The right-hand fork is the route to the southern beaches and continues southwards along the west coast for 14km to the southern tip.

Just beyond the junction, the little enclave of bungalows, restaurants, bars – and strangely plentiful tattoo shops – at **HAT KHLONG NIN** lend this beach more of a village atmosphere than the northern beaches. The (quiet) west-coast road runs close alongside the shore and is still lined with trees and greenery, while the beach itself is lovely: long and sandy and good for swimming. The burgeoning if fairly low-key nightlife revolves around a dozen little beach bars and there are quite a few places to stay here – rather tightly packed at the centre of the beach, more spaced at the northerly end; some places have bungalows both on the shore and across the road. The large, beach-view **restaurant** *Otto Bar and Grill*, serves seafood and Thai and European dishes and *Cook Kai* restaurant, across from *Chalee Bar* bungalows, teaches Thai cooking.

Nearly all the bungalows rent **motorbikes** for B250 per day and many also offer email and international phone services; there's a **minimarket**, **ATM** and **clinic** at the Ban Khlong Nin junction. Taxis to Sala Dan should cost about B50 per person and you can walk the 3km to the Tham Mai Kaew caves from Khlong Nin in about an hour.

Accommodation

Atcha Hut Ⓣ089 470 4607, Ⓦwww.atchahut.com, Ⓔjuneto14@hotmail.com. A truly individual, alternative spot at the northern end of the beach, where a couple of adobe caravanserai-style dormitory buildings have B150 beds, each in their own little concrete, open-sided cubbyhole, screened by a curtain. Also has about eight dinky, en-suite wooden bungalows and serves communal lunch and dinner on its rainbow-painted decks set under the screw palms beside the shore. ③–④

Chalee Bar and Bungalows ⓣ081 535 5507. Cute, homely place of just half a dozen simple, rickety but en-suite fan-cooled bamboo bungalows, all with decks and shell mobiles and set in a pretty little garden behind the shorefront bar, which hosts regular live-music parties. ②

Lanta Nice Beach Resort ⓣ075 697276, ⓦwww.krabidir.com/lantanicebeach. Located on a broad swathe of sand, this place comprises several rows of spacious concrete bungalows, many with sea views and some with air-con, plus a neat arrangement of cheaper bamboo bungalows in a garden across the road from the beach. Air-con ⑤–⑦

Lanta Paradise ⓣ089 473 3279, ⓦwww.lantaparadiseresort.com. Long-running beachfront accommodation where you can choose between old, pretty cheap, wooden fan huts and big, concrete air-con bungalows nearer the sea. Though the concrete bungalows are packed uncomfortably close together, they feel spacious inside. There's a pool here too. Fan ②–④, air-con ⑥–⑦

Miami Bungalow ⓣ075 697081, ⓦwww.lantamiami.com. Options here range from simple wooden huts with fans to larger concrete versions, some with air-con and sea view. ⑤–⑦

Nature Beach Bungalow ⓣ081 397 0785, ⓦwww.krabidir.com/lantanaturebeach. Has large, high-standard concrete villas with air-con or fan, both on the beachfront and in a garden across the road. Fan ④–⑤, air-con ⑥–⑦

Hat Khlong Nam Jud

Just over 1km south of Hat Khlong Nin, the road passes the two tiny little bays known as **HAT KHLONG NAM JUD**. The northerly one is the domain of *The Narima* (ⓣ075 607700, ⓦwww.narima-lanta.com; ⑦–⑧), a very quiet but welcoming, elegantly designed resort of 32 posh but unadorned thatch-roofed bamboo bungalows set in three rows in a palm-filled garden. The bungalows all have polished wood floors, verandas with sea view, and fans as well as air-con (but no TV); there's also a three-tiered pool (with kids' level), a spa and a dive centre, and staff rent out jeeps.

Around the headland to the south, the next tiny cove is rocky in parts but enjoys a swimmable beach and one set of bungalows, *Lanta Coral Beach* (ⓣ075 618073; ③–⑥; closed May–Oct). The twenty good-sized bamboo and concrete huts here are scattered among the palms (some of which are hung with hammocks) and come with fan or air-con; you can rent kayaks here too.

Ao Kantiang

The secluded cove of **AO KANTIANG**, some 7km beyond Hat Khlong Nam Jud, is an impressively curved sweep of long, sandy bay backed by jungle-clad hillsides and fronted by just a few bungalows and one large hotel. The beach is good for swimming, there's some coral at the northern end, and snorkelling and fishing trips are easily arranged. Because it's quite protected it's generally also fine for swimming in the rainy season. The roadside village covers most necessities, including tours, onward transport, motorbike rental and Internet access. There's also a clinic a little further south, between *Kantiang Bay View* and *Pimalai*. Wherever you're staying on Ao Kantiang, it's well worth heading down to *Same Same But Different*, a lovely tranquil haven of a **restaurant** on the beach to the south of *Pimalai*, where the tables are set beneath a tangled growth of shrubs and vines, surrounded by shell mobiles and driftwood sculptures; it's run by the man behind the renowned *Ruen Mai* restaurant in Krabi, and the mid-priced menu of mainly Thai and seafood dishes is of a similarly high standard.

The thirty or so **bungalows** at *Lanta Marine Park View* (ⓣ081 956 2935, ⓦwww.lantamarine.com; fan ③, air-con ⑦) are ranged up the slope at the northern end of the beach: steps lead down to the shore. The best of the bungalows, though pricey, are great value as they're on stilts and enjoy glorious bay views from their balconies and glass-fronted interiors, and the furnishings are chic and modern. The cheap fan-cooled bamboo bungalows sit further back and are plain and not very interesting for the price. There's also a small cliffside bar affording great views, plus Internet access and a tour agency. Down at sea level, in the middle of the bay, *Kantiang Bay View Resort* (ⓣ081 787 5192; fan ❷–❺, air-con ❺–❼) also offers lots of different accommodation options, in 26 rooms, including plenty of good, cheap bamboo huts, concrete huts (fan and air-con) and rooms in a small block. Weather permitting, they are also one of the few places to run four-island tours throughout the year. The southern end of Ao Kantiang is the province of Ko Lanta's poshest hotel, the *Pimalai Resort and Spa* (ⓣ075 607999, ⓦwww.pimalai.com; ❾; published rates from B8950), which spreads over such an extensive area that guests are shuttled around in golf buggies. All rooms are luxuriously and elegantly designed in contemporary style, and there's a delightful spa, a swimming pool and dive centre. However, only the more expensive accommodation gets a sea view (the walled beach villas are particularly stunning but cost B18,500). From November to April, guests are transferred direct to the resort by boat, landing at the *Pimalai*'s private floating jetty.

Ao Khlong Jaak and Ao Mai Phai

The paved road terminates at the *Pimalai* boundary at the southern end of Ao Kantiang, so from here to Lanta's southern tip, about 4km away, access is via a steeply undulating, rutted and potholed track that's either dusty or muddy depending on the season – take care on a motorbike as it's extremely challenging. The next bay south of Ao Kantiang is **AO KHLONG JAAK**, site of the upscale and pretty pricey *Anda Lanta Resort* (ⓣ075 607555, ⓦwww.andalanta.com; ❼–❽), where you have the option of rather cramped bamboo huts, attractive cliffside wooden huts that enjoy fine views, deluxe, quite chic, shorefront concrete bungalows in various sizes and permutations, or rooms in a block. All accommodation is air-con, many rooms have DVD players, and there's a pool, Internet and international phone services, kayak rental and organized boat trips. Sharing the bay, but right at the other end, *Khlong Jaak Bungalows* (ⓣ089 866 2768; closed May-Oct; ❷–❹) has a range of fan-cooled bamboo huts, from simple en-suite rooms in a line at the back of the compound through to bigger front-row bungalows.

A kilometre south, over the headland from *Klong Jaak Bungalows*, brings you to the lovely white-sand **AO MAI PHAI**, which is extremely peaceful and has good coral close to the shore – though this makes it too rocky for low-tide swimming, when you'll need to kayak up to Ao Klong Jaak instead. At the northern end of the bay, the Danish-Thai-run *Bamboo Bay Resort* (ⓣ075 618240, ⓦwww.bamboobay.net; fan ❹–❻, air-con ❼) offers 21 concrete bungalows, with fan or air-con, stepped up the cliffside above the headland, plus a few just across the narrow road. Nearly all have great sea views and interiors are spacious and of a high standard. Its *pièce de résistance* is its idyllically sited deck restaurant and bar, which jut out over the rocks just above the water. Occupying the centre of the bay and deservedly popular is the cute, tasteful and welcoming ★ *Baan Phu Lae* (ⓣ081 201 1704, ⓦwww.baanphulae.net; fan ❹, air-con ❻), which manages to combine an appealing whiff of Bangkok sophistication with laid-back island charm. The bamboo bungalows are stylishly simple, have good beds and come with fan or air-con; nearly all enjoy direct sea views, many of them from the shorefront, and there are plenty of shell mobiles and hammocks around.

The interior and the east coast

Although the **east coast** lacks decent beaches, it's got plenty of other attractions, including an impressive series of caves at **Tham Mai Kaew**, a jaw-droppingly great **view over islands and coastlines** at the viewpoint (worth an early rise), an atmospheric neighbourhood in **Lanta Old Town**, and cultural interest at the **Sea Gypsy Home**. The tiny island of Ko Bubu is also reached from here. Access to the east coast is easy as the road is good: it starts at the Ban Klong Nin junction half way down the west coast at kilometre-stone 13. Alternatively, most tour agencies over guided day-trips covering this area.

Tham Mai Kaew caves

One kilometre beyond the fork, a two-kilometre side road veers off the eastbound road and leads to **Tham Mai Kaew caves**, Ko Lanta's biggest inland attraction. There are myriad chambers here, some of which you can only just crawl into, and they boast stalactites and interesting rock formations as well as a creepy cave pool and the inevitable bats. Access to the cave is regulated by the local family who first properly explored the cave system in the 1980s: they now act as caretakers and guides, in conjunction with the national park authorities, and charge B200 for a two-hour tour. These tours leave frequently throughout the day, year-round and include an easy walk through forest to the mouth of the cave (also possible on elephant for an extra B100), an hour's guided scramble through the most accessible part of the cave system, and the all-important head-torch. Guides also lead longer cave trips (B400) and extended all-day jungle treks up the mountain with or without overnight in a jungle hammock (B800/1200). Most of Thailand's countless caves are underwhelming and certainly not worth B200, but this is one of the better ones, not least because the caretakers have resisted the temptation to string it with electric lights so you're left to wonder both at what you catch with your flashlight and at what you don't see. Among its star features are crystallized waterfalls, fossils and ammonites embedded in the cave walls and overhangs, stalagmites and stalactites young and old and a tangible sense of there being endless passageways to explore. In the rainy season it's a more slippery, challenging experience, with some wading likely and the option of a dip in the wet-season-only lagoon. Even in the dry season it's moderately arduous and best done in sensible shoes and clothes you're happy to get grubby in. If you don't have your own transport, a motorcycle taxi costs B150 each way from Khlong Dao or Ao Phra-Ae.

The viewpoint and Lanta Old Town (Ban Si Raya)

Three kilometres beyond the turn-off to the caves, the eastbound road drops down over the central spine of hills and you pass *Viewpoint* café (daily 6am–9pm), where nearly everyone stops for a drink and a gawp at the stunning panorama. The **view over the east coast** is glorious, encompassing the southeast coast of mangrove-fringed Ko Lanta Noi, dozens of islets – including Ko Bubu and Ko Por – adrift in the milky blue sea, and the hilly profile of the mainland along the horizon. It's an unbeatable spot for a sunrise breakfast.

Once back down at sea level, follow the east-coast road (Route 4245) south for a few kilometres to reach, at kilometre-stone 20, the seductively atmospheric little waterfront settlement of **LANTA OLD TOWN**, officially known as **BAN SI RAYA**. Ko Lanta's oldest town, it began life as a sheltered staging post for ships sailing between China and Penang and served as the island's administrative capital from 1901–1998. The government offices have since moved to Ko Lanta Noi, and Ban Sala Dan has assumed the role of harbour, island gateway and commercial hub, so Ban Si Raya has been left much as it was a century ago, with its historic charm intact. There's little more to the Old Town than its peaceful main street, which runs right along the coast and is lined with traditional, one-hundred-year-old sea- and wind-blasted wooden homes and shops, many of them constructed on stilted jetties over the sea, their first-floor overhangs shading the pavements and plant-filled doorways. The Chinese shrine midway down the street is evidence of the town's cultural mix: Ban Si Raya is home to a long-established Chinese-Thai community as well as to Muslims.

There are several enticing **restaurants** in the old town: the dining area at locally popular *Kroua Lanta Yai Seafood* is on a jetty over the seafront, while sophisticated little *Mango House Bar and Bistro* is all done out in stylish dark wood and, as well as serving tourist-oriented food and drink, has a small library of English-language books, and a couple of similarly arty **rooms** for rent upstairs (Ⓣ081 677 2866, Ⓦwww.bestofkolanta.com; ⑥). There's an Internet centre on the main street but otherwise it's nearly all local general stores. The hourly Krabi minibus service starts from Lanta Old Town.

Sea Gypsy Home and Ban Sang-Ga-U

About 3km south of Lanta Old Town, an inviting hand-painted sign draws you down to a stony mangrove shore and the intriguing, driftwood-architecture **Sea Gypsy Home** (Ⓣ089 467 3312, Ⓔshadowgypsyhome@yahoo.com), which is café, homestay (B100 per person), handmade handicrafts outlet, art gallery and, most interestingly, a resource centre of *chao ley* ("sea gypsy") culture. Ko Lanta's *chao ley* are **Urak Lawoy** (see the box on pp.370–71 for an introduction to the Urak Lawoy and other *chao ley* groups in Thailand) and are thought to have been the island's first inhabitants, perhaps as long as 500 years ago, living along the shoreline during the monsoon season and setting off along the coast again when the winds abated. Lanta's community of Urak Lawoy have now settled permanently in the village of **BAN SANG-GA-U**, 1km to the south of the Sea Gypsy Home; other Urak Lawoy living elsewhere in the Andaman Sea, around Trang and beyond, consider Ko Lanta their capital and will always stop at Sang Ga U when making a journey. Though the Sea Gypsy Home is not run by the *chao ley* and doesn't try to be a formal ethnographic museum, it does have lots of information about the Urak Lawoy and is especially strong on their **music**, displaying many of their musical instruments and selling CD recordings. Their music is an interesting fusion of far-flung influences, featuring violins (from the Dutch East Indies), drums (from Persia), and gongs (from China), as well as singing, dancing and ritual elements. The best time to experience their music is at one of their twice-yearly three-day **festivals**, which are held at full moon in the sixth and eleventh lunar months (usually June and November) on a beach close by the centre. This is also when they launch their special *zalacca* boats, a miniature version of which is on permanent display at the Sea Gypsy Home.

South beyond Sang-Ga-U, the road ends at kilometre-stone 26, where a track branches off westwards to a tiny stony bay and the bizarre **hotel** that is *Sang Kha Ou Resort and Spa* (Ⓣ086 952 3244, Ⓦwww.sangkhaouresortspa.com; ④–⑦). Rooms here are designed in a fantasy-kitsch back-to-nature style and include "cave rooms" with boulder-studded walls and pseudo-primitive concrete artwork, plus some more appealing treehouses and Thai-style rooms. There's also a shooting range. The hotel is right on the edge of national park land, and you can walk across to the park headquarters in about an hour.

Ko Bubu

The minuscule, wooded island of **KO BUBU**, with a radius of just 500m, lies 7km northeast off Lanta Old Town and is the preserve of *Bubu Island Resort* (Ⓣ075 612536; ③–④; closed May–Oct), which has a dozen en-suite bungalows and a restaurant. It's twenty minutes' chartered **longtail** ride (B100) from Lanta Old Town.

Travel details

Buses

Cheow Lan Lake (Ratchabrapa Dam, Khao Sok) to: Phunphin (Surat Thani train station; every 2hr; 1hr).

Khao Lak to: Khao Sok (every 90min; 1hr 30min); Phuket (11 daily; 2hr 30min); Ranong (8 daily; 2hr 30min–3hr); Surat Thani (every 90min; 3hr 30min); Takua Pa (every 40min; 30min).

Khao Sok to: Khao Lak (every 90min; 1hr 30min); Surat Thani (every 90min; 2hr); Takua Pa (every 90min; 50min).

Krabi to: Bangkok (7 daily; 12–14hr); Hat Yai (13 daily; 4–5hr); Ko Lanta (hourly; 2hr); Nakhon Si Thammarat (at least hourly; 3–4hr); Phattalung (2 daily; 3hr); Phang Nga (every 30min; 1hr 30min–2hr); Phuket (every 30min; 3–5hr); Ranong (4 daily; 6–7hr); Satun (2 daily; 5hr); Sungai Kolok (3 daily; 9hr); Surat Thani (hourly; 2–3hr); Takua Pa (4 daily; 3hr 30min–4hr 30min); Trang (at least hourly; 2–3hr).

Phang Nga to: Bangkok (6 daily; 11hr–12hr 30min); Krabi (every 30min; 1hr 30min–2hr); Phuket (every 30min; 1hr 30min–2hr 30min); Surat Thani (5 daily; 4hr); Takua Pa (hourly; 2hr); Trang (every 30min; 3hr).

Phuket to: Bangkok (27 daily; 14–15hr); Chumphon (3 daily; 6hr 30min); Hat Yai (16 daily; 6–8hr); Khao Lak (12 daily; 2hr 30min); Khao Sok (at least 2 daily; 3–4hr); Khuraburi (12 daily; 3hr 30min–4hr); Krabi (22 daily; 3–5hr); Nakhon Si Thammarat (27 daily; 7–8hr); Phang Nga (30 daily; 1hr 30min–2hr 30min); Phattalung (2 daily; 6–7hr); Ranong (12 daily; 5–6hr); Satun (3 daily; 7hr); Sungai Kolok (3 daily; 11hr); Surat Thani (21 daily; 4hr 30min–6hr); Takua Pa (20 daily; 2hr 30min–3hr); Trang (20 daily; 5–6hr).

Ranong to: Bangkok (12 daily; 8–10hr); Chumphon (hourly; 2–3hr); Hat Yai (3 daily; 5hr); Khuraburi (8 daily; 1hr 30min–2hr); Krabi (5 daily; 6–7hr); Phang Nga (5 daily; 4–5hr); Phuket (8 daily; 5–6hr); Surat Thani (10 daily; 3–5hr); Takua Pa (8 daily; 2hr 30min–3hr).

Takua Pa to: Bangkok (10 daily; 12–13hr); Khuraburi (at least 8 daily; 1hr); Krabi (at least 4 daily; 3hr); Phuket (hourly; 3hr); Ranong (5 daily; 3hr 30min–4hr); Surat Thani (11 daily; 3hr 15min).

Ferries

Ao Nang to: Ko Lanta Yai (Nov–May 1 daily; 2hr 30min); Ko Phi Phi Don (1 daily; 2hr 30min); Phuket (1 daily; 3hr).

Khuraburi to: Ko Surin (Nov–May 1–2 daily; 1–3hr).

Ko Lanta Yai to: Ao Nang (Nov–May 1 daily; 2hr 30min); Ko Phi Phi Don (Nov–May 2 daily; 1hr 30min); Krabi (mid-Oct to mid-May 2 daily; 2hr 30min); Phuket (Nov–May 2 daily; 4hr 30min)._

Ko Phi Phi Don to: Ao Nang and Laem Phra Nang (Nov–May 1 daily; 2hr 30min); Ko Lanta Yai (Nov–May 2 daily; 1hr 30min); Krabi (2 daily; 2hr); Phuket (2 daily; 1hr 30min–2hr 30min).

Ko Yao Noi to: Krabi (Ao Thalen; daily; 1hr); Phang Nga (daily; 90min); Phuket (4 daily; 1hr).

Krabi to: Ko Jum (mid-Oct to mid-May 2 daily; 1hr 30min–2hr); Ko Lanta Yai (mid-Oct to mid-May 2 daily; 2hr 30min); Ko Phi Phi Don (2 daily; 2hr); Ko Yao Noi (departs Ao Thalen; 2 daily; 1hr).

Laem Kruat to: Ban Ko Jum.

Phang Nga (Tha Dan) to: Ko Yao Noi (daily; 90min).

Phuket to: Ao Nang (Nov–May daily; 2hr–2hr 30min); Ko Phi Phi Don (2 daily; 1hr 30min–2hr 30min); Ko Lanta Yai (Nov–May 1 daily; 4hr 30min); Ko Yao Noi (5 daily; 1hr).

Ranong to: Ko Chang (Nov–May 3–4 daily; 1hr); Ko Phayam (Nov–May 1–4 daily; 40min–3hr).

Thap Lamu (Khao Lak) to: Ko Similan (Nov–May 1 daily; 2hr).

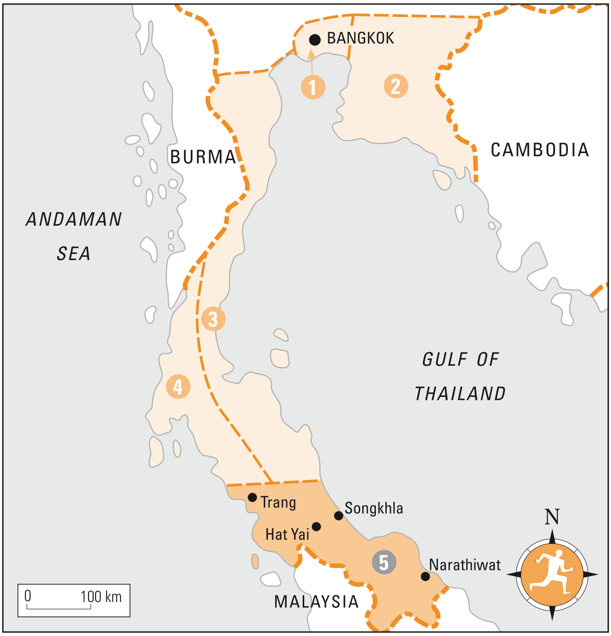
Flights

Krabi to: Bangkok (up to 6 daily; 1hr 20min).

Phuket to: Bangkok (15 daily; 1hr 20min); Ko Samui (2 daily; 50min); Pattaya/ U-Tapao (1–2 daily; 1hr 40min–2hr 20min).

5

The deep south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CHAPTER 5

Highlights

- **Thale Noi Waterbird Park** Boating on this fascinating inland lake isn't just for birdwatchers. See p.489

- **Ko Mook** One of the best of the Trang islands, with laid-back resorts and the stunning Emerald Cave. See p.496

- **Ko Sukorn** For a glimpse of how islanders live and an outstanding beach resort. See p.499

- **Ko Tarutao National Marine Park** A largely undisturbed haven of beautiful land- and seascapes. See p.504

- **Ko Lipe** One dazzling beach, fine opportunities for snorkelling and diving, and an appealing rough-and-ready feel. See p.508

△ Hat Pattaya, Ko Lipe

The deep south

The frontier between Thailand and Malaysia carves across the peninsula six degrees north of the equator, but the cultures of the two countries shade into each other much further north. According to official divisions, the southern Thais – the thai pak tai – begin around Chumphon, and as you move further down the peninsula you see ever more sarongs, yashmaks and towering mosques, and hear with increasing frequency a staccato dialect that baffles many Thais. In Trang and Phatthalung provinces, the Muslim population is generally accepted as being Thai, but the inhabitants of the southernmost provinces – Satun, Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and most of Songkhla – are ethnically more akin to the Malays: most of the 1.5 million followers of Islam here speak Yawi, an old Malay dialect. To add to the ethnic confusion, the deep south has a large urban population of Chinese, whose comparative wealth makes them stand out sharply from the Muslim farmers and fishermen.

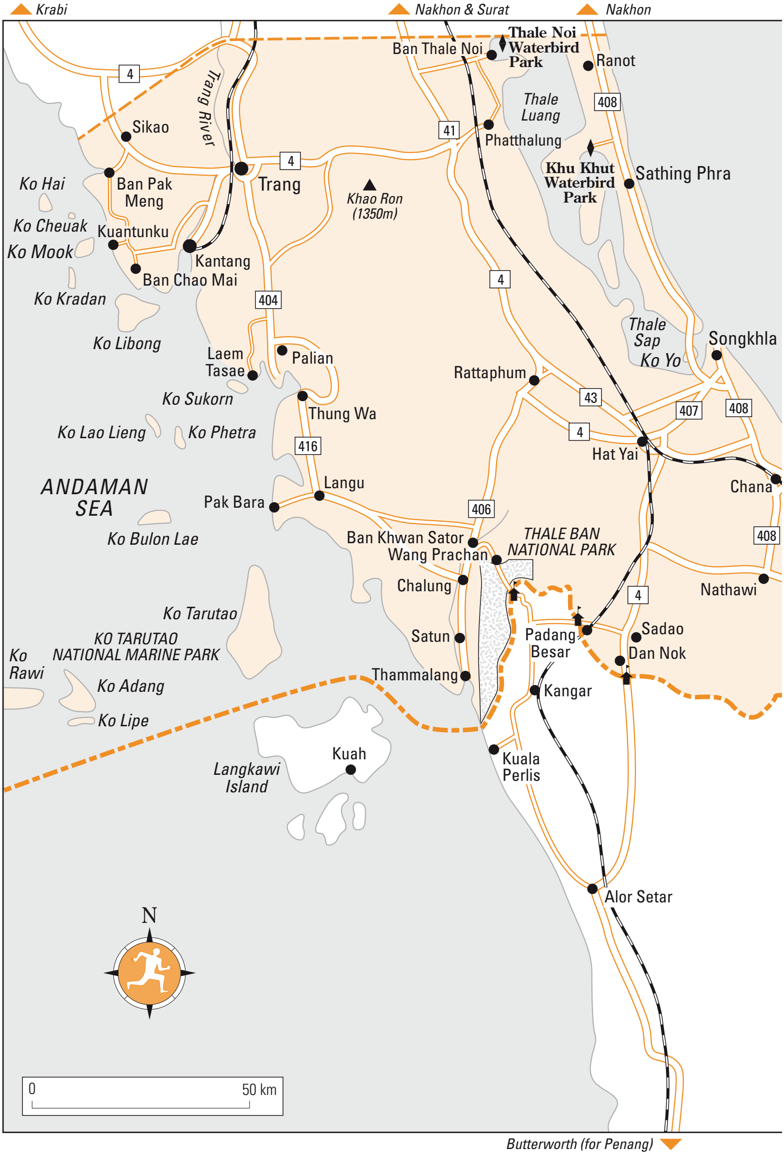
On a journey south, the first thing you might be tempted by is an atmospheric boat trip through the **Thale Noi Waterbird Park** near Phatthalung. Over on the beautiful **west coast**, sheer limestone outcrops, pristine sands and fish-laden coral stretch down to the Malaysian border. The spread of tourism outwards from Phuket has been inching its way south towards **Trang** for some time now, but the

Travel warning

Because of the ongoing **violence** in the deep south (see p.488), all major Western governments are currently advising people **not to travel** to or through Songkhla, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces, unless essential. This encompasses the city and transport hub of **Hat Yai** and several of the main border crossings to Malaysia: by rail from Hat Yai (and Bangkok) to Butterworth via Padang Besar and to Sungai Kolok; and by road from Hat Yai via Sadao, from Yala via Betong, and down the east coast to Kota Bharu.

The routes to Sungai Kolok, Betong and Kota Bharu pass through particularly volatile territory, with **martial law** declared in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces; however, martial law is not in effect in Hat Yai itself or the districts of Songkhla province through which the Bangkok–Butterworth rail line or the Hat Yai–Sadao road pass.

The provinces of Phatthalung, Trang and Satun are not affected, and it's still perfectly possible to continue overland via **Satun**: by share-taxi from Satun town to Alor Setar via Thale Ban National Park, or by ferry from nearby Thammalang to Kuala Perlis or the Malaysian island of Langkawi (see p.502); or by irregular boats from Ko Lipe to Langkawi (see p.506). For up-to-the-minute advice, consult your government travel advisory (see p.69).


Krabi
Nakhon & Surat
Nakhon
Thale Noi Waterbird Park
Ban Thale Noi
Ranot
Thale Luang
Phatthalung
Trang River
Sikao
Ban Pak Meng
Trang
Khao Ron (1350m)
Khu Khut Waterbird Park
Sathing Phra
Ko Hai
Ko Cheuak
Kuantunku
Ko Mook
Kantang
Ban Chao Mai
Ko Kradan
Ko Libong
Laem Tasae
Palian
Thale Sap
Ko Yo
Songkhla
Rattaphum
Ko Sukorn
Thung Wa
Ko Lao Lieng
Ko Phetra
Hat Yai
Chana
ANDAMAN SEA
Langu
Pak Bara
Ko Bulon Lae
Ban Khwan Sator
Wang Prachan
THALE BAN NATIONAL PARK
Chalung
Nathawi
Ko Tarutao
KO TARUTAO NATIONAL MARINE PARK
Ko Rawi
Satun
Padang Besar
Sadao
Dan Nok
Thammalang
Ko Adang
Kangar
Ko Lipe
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Langkawi Island
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408
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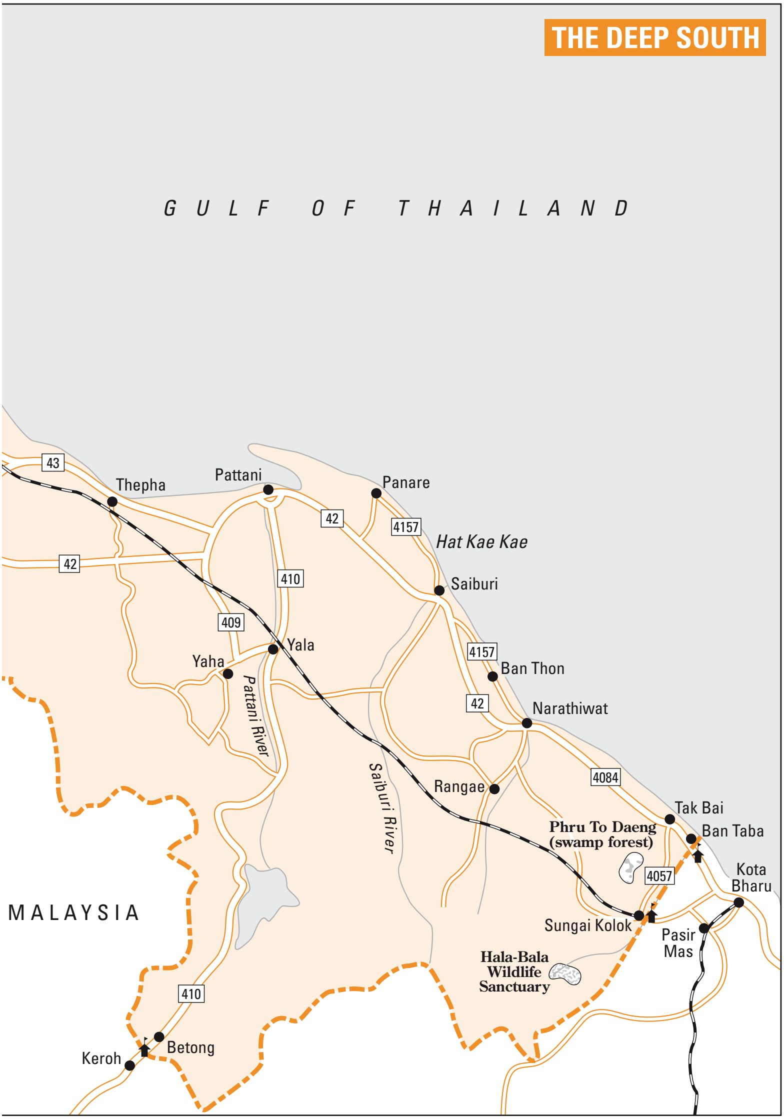
0
50 km
Butterworth (for Penang)

province remains largely undeveloped. Along the mainland **coast** here, there's a thirty-kilometre stretch of attractive beaches, dotted with mangroves and impressive caves that can be explored by sea canoe, but the real attraction of the province is the offshore **islands**, which offer gorgeous panoramas and beaches, great snorkelling and at least a modicum of comfort in their small clusters of resorts. Further south in the spectacular **Ko Tarutao National Park**, you'll usually have the place



THE DEEP SOUTH

GULF OF THAILAND
43
42
Thepha
Pattani
Panare
42
4157
Hat Kae Kae
Saiburi
410
409
Yala
Yaha
Pattani River
4157
Ban Thon
42
Narathiwat
Saiburi River
Rangae
4084
Tak Bai
Ban Taba
Phru To Daeng (swamp forest)
4057
Kota Bharu
Sungai Kolok
Pasir Mas
Hala-Bala Wildlife Sanctuary
MALAYSIA
410
Betong
Keroh

much to yourself, although **Ko Lipe** and its beautiful beach of Hat Pattaya have been arousing travellers' interest of late, albeit at a low-key, manageable level.

As well as the usual bus services, the area covered in this chapter is served by flights to Trang and trains to Phatthalung and Trang. The deep south is also the territory of **share-taxis**, which connect all the major towns for about twice the fare of ordinary buses. The cars leave when they're full, which usually means six passengers, with, quite possibly, babes-in-arms and livestock. They are a quick way of getting around and you should get dropped off at the door of your journey's end. A more recent – and now more successful – phenomenon, run on almost exactly the same principles at similar prices, is **air-conditioned minibuses**; on these you'll be more comfortable, with a seat to yourself, and most of the various ranks publish a rough timetable – though the minibuses also tend to leave as soon as they're full.

Some history

The central area of the Malay peninsula first entered Thai history when it came under the rule of Sukhothai, probably around the beginning of the fourteenth century. Islam was introduced to the area by the end of that century, by which time Ayutthaya was taking a firmer grip on the peninsula. **Songkhla** and **Pattani** then rose to be the major cities, prospering on the goods passed through the two ports across the peninsula to avoid the pirates in the Straits of Malacca between Malaysia and Sumatra. More closely tied to the Muslim Malay states to the south, Pattani began to **rebel** against the central power of Ayutthaya in the sixteenth century, but the fight for self-determination only weakened Pattani's strength. The town's last rebellious fling was in 1902, seven years after which Pattani was isolated from its allies, Kedah, Kelantan and Trengganu, when they were transferred into the suzerainty of the British in Malaysia.

During World War II the **Communist Party of Malaya** made its home in the jungle around the Thai border to fight the occupying Japanese. After the war they turned their guns against the British colonialists, but having been excluded from power after independence, descended into general banditry and racketeering around Betong. The Thai authorities eventually succeeded in breaking up the bandit gangs in 1989 through a combination of pardons and bribes, but the stability of the region then faced disruption from another source, a rise in **Islamic militancy**. The mid-1990s saw a concerted outburst of violence from the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) and other separatist groups, either in the form of general banditry, or directed against schools, the police and other symbols of central government. Towards the end of the decade the situation improved considerably, with closer cooperation between Thailand and Malaysia, and a string of progressive measures from the Thai government that earned praise from other Islamic nations.

However, after 9/11 tensions rose again, and in early 2004, criminally and politically motivated violence escalated sharply. Since then, there have been over 1200 deaths on both sides in the troubles, and barely a day goes by without a violent incident of one kind or another. The insurgents have targeted monks, police, soldiers, teachers and other civil servants, as well as attacking a train on the Hat Yai–Sungai Kolok line and setting off bombs in marketplaces, near tourist hotels and bars and at Hat Yai airport. The authorities have inflamed opinion in the south by reacting violently, notably in crushing protests at Tak Bai and the much-revered Krue Se Mosque in Pattani in 2004, in which a total of over two hundred alleged insurgents died. In 2005, the government announced a **serious state of emergency** in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces, and imposed **martial law** here and in parts of Songkhla province. This, however, has exacerbated economic and unemployment problems in what is Thailand's poorest region.

A large part of the problem is that a wide variety of shadowy groups – with names like the Pattani Islamic Mujahideen, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate and New Pulo – are operating against the government. It's unclear who they are, what they want and how far they are motivated by separatism, Islamic fundamentalism or just gang-related criminality. Concern is growing that Islamist terrorist networks linked to Al-Qaeda – such as Jemaah Islamiyah, thought to be responsible for the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005 – could move in to exploit the situation, if they haven't already done so. The authorities have generally maintained that a military solution is attainable, but an inquiry by the **National Reconciliation Commission**, headed by former prime minister Anand Panyarachun, has recently proposed, among other measures, the introduction of Islamic law in the southern provinces, the formation of an unarmed battalion to deal with disputes between the state and the people, and the adoption of ethnic Malay as a second official language. It remains to be seen, however, whether the new government in Bangkok will heed these proposals or how successful they might be.

Phatthalung and Thale Noi

Halfway between Nakhon and Hat Yai, the hot, dusty town of **PHATTHALUNG** is worth a stop only if you're tempted by a boat trip through the nearby Thale Noi Waterbird Park – though even then it's possible to bypass the town altogether, as outlined below. Although its setting among limestone outcrops is dramatic, Phatthalung itself is of little interest, its only claim to fame being *nang thalung*, the Thai shadow puppet theatre to which it probably gave its name (see box on p.344).

Phatthalung is on the major rail line, which crosses the main street, Thanon Ramet, in the centre of town. Out of a poor selection of **hotels**, the best value is the friendly *Thai Hotel*, at 14 Thanon Disara Sakarin, behind the Bangkok Bank on Thanon Ramet (☎074 611636; fan ②, air-con ③); rooms with attached bathrooms and a choice of fan or air-conditioning are clean and reasonably quiet. *Koo Hoo*, around the corner at 9 Thanon Prachabamrung (parallel to and south of Ramet), is an excellent, moderately priced **restaurant** – try the sweet and sour fish or the delicious giant tiger prawns.

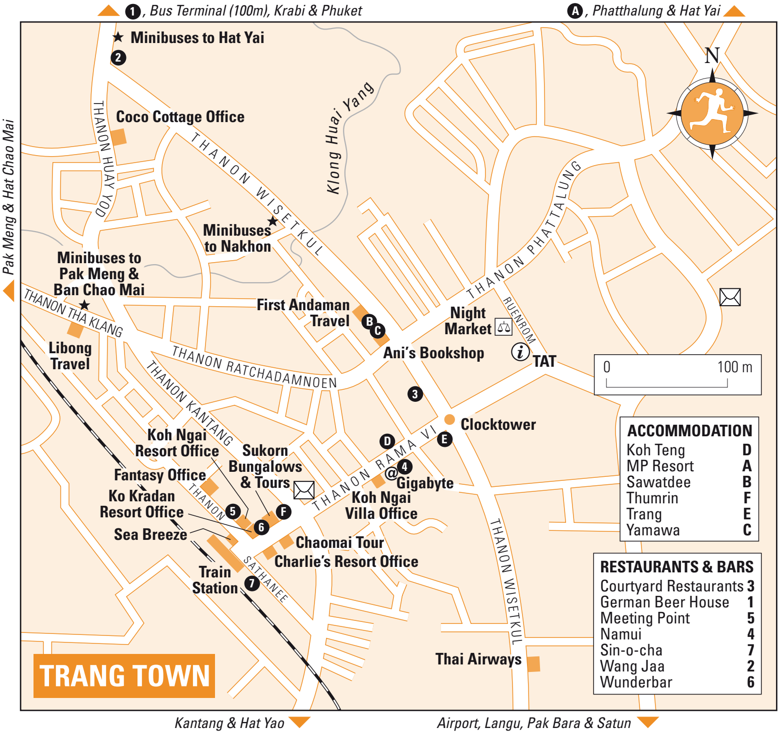
Thale Noi Waterbird Park

Thale Noi Waterbird Park isn't just for bird-spotters – even the most recalcitrant city-dweller can appreciate boating through the bizarre freshwater habitat formed at the head of the huge lagoon that spills into the sea at Songkhla. Here, in the "Little Sea" (*thale noi*), which has an average depth of just 1.5m, the distinction between land and water breaks down: the lake is dotted with low, marshy islands, and much of the intervening shallow water is so thickly covered with water vines, lotus pads and reeds that it looks like a field. But the real delight of this area is the hundreds of thousands of birds that breed here – brown teals, loping purple herons, white cattle egrets and nearly two hundred other species. Most are migratory, arriving here from December onwards from as far away as Siberia. March and April provide the widest variety of birds; from October to December you'll generally spot only native species, while June to September is the worst season for spotting. Early morning and late afternoon are the best times to come, when the heat is less searing and when, in the absence of hunters and fishermen, more birds are visible.

To get from Phatthalung to **BAN THALE NOI**, the village on the western shore, take one of the frequent **songthaews** (1hr) from Thanon Nivas, which runs north off Thanon Ramet near the station, or from the Bangkok Bank on Thanon Ramet in front of the *Thai Hotel*. If you're coming from Nakhon or points further north by bus, you can save yourself a trip into Phatthalung by getting out at **Ban Chai Khlong**, 15km from Ban Thale Noi, and waiting for a songthaew there. If you're travelling by train, it's also possible to bypass Phatthalung, by getting out at **Ban Pak Khlong** and catching a songthaew for the last 8km to Ban Thale Noi. **Longtail boats** can be hired at the pier in the village: for B300, the boatman will give you a one-hour trip around the lake. If you want to get a dawn start, stay in one of the few national park **bungalows** built over the lake (donation required; book on ☎074 685230).

Trang town

The town of **TRANG** (aka Taptieng), 60km west of Phatthalung, is fast developing as a popular jumping-off point for backpackers drawn south from the crowded sands of Krabi to the pristine beaches and islands of the nearby coast. The town, which prospers on rubber, oil palms, fisheries and – increasingly – tourism, is a sociable place whose wide, clean streets are dotted with crumbling, wooden-shuttered houses. In the evening, restaurant tables sprawl onto the main Thanon Rama VI and Thanon Wisetkul, and during the day, many of the town's Chinese inhabitants hang out in the cafés, drinking the local filtered coffee. Trang's Chinese population makes the **Vegetarian Festival** at the beginning of October almost as frenetic as Phuket's (see box on p.395) – and for veggie travellers it's an opportunity to feast at the stalls set up around the temples. Getting there is easy, as Trang is ninety minutes from Phatthalung and well served by buses and air-con minibuses from all the surrounding provinces.


1, Bus Terminal (100m), Krabi & Phuket
A, Phatthalung & Hat Yai
Pak Meng & Hat Chao Mai
Kantang & Hat Yao
Airport, Langu, Pak Bara & Satun
N
Minibuses to Hat Yai
2
Coco Cottage Office
THANON HUAY YOD
THANON WISETKUL
Klong Huai Yang
Minibuses to Nakhon
Minibuses to Pak Meng & Ban Chao Mai
THANON THA KLANG
Libong Travel
First Andaman Travel
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THANON PHATTALUNG
Night Market
RUENROM
TAT
Ani's Bookshop
THANON RATCHADAMNOEN
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Fantasy Office
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Koh Ngai Villa Office
Sea Breeze
Chaomai Tour
Charlie's Resort Office
Train Station
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SATHANEE
THANON WISETKUL
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Koh Teng D
MP Resort A
Sawatdee B
Thumrin F
Trang E
Yamawa C
RESTAURANTS & BARS
Courtyard Restaurants 3
German Beer House 1
Meeting Point 5
Namui 4
Sin-o-cha 7
Wang Jaa 2
Wunderbar 6

Practicalities

Nok Air (ⓣ075 212229, at the airport) run daily **flights** between Bangkok and Trang airport, which is connected to Trang town by B50 air-conditioned minibuses, operated by, for example, World Travel Service, 25/2 Thanon Sathanee (ⓣ075 214010–1). Two overnight **trains** from the capital run down a branch of the southern line to Trang, stopping at the station at the western end of Thanon Rama VI. Most **buses** arrive at the terminal on Thanon Huay Yod, to the north of the centre, including the air-conditioned service between Satun and Phuket; ordinary buses from Satun stop on Thanon Ratsada out on the southeast side of town. **Air-conditioned minibuses** for Nakhon Si Thammarat have their office on Thanon Wisetkul, those for Surat Thani on Thanon Tha Klang, and those for Hat Yai on Thanon Huay Yod near the main bus terminal. Those for Ban Saladan on Ko Lanta and Pak Bara don't have specific offices, but can be booked through several guest houses and **travel agencies** around town, including Sukorn Beach Bungalows and Tours, 22 Thanon Sathanee (ⓣ075 211457, ⓦwww.sukorn-island-trang.com). This well-organized outfit offers a wide range of services – including accommodation booking on any island, boat trips and trekking, rafting and sea-canoeing excursions – in addition to running their own bungalow outfit on Ko Sukorn. The friendly staff are a great source of information on the area, and their office makes a good first stop in town.

TAT have a small **tourist office** on Thanon Ruenrom (daily 8.30am–4.30pm; ⓣ075 215867–8, ⓔtattrang@tat.or.th). There's a good **bookshop**, Ani's, at 285 Thanon Ratchadamnoen (ⓣ081 397 4574), which buys and sells a wide range of second-hand books in English, as well as selling handicrafts, beachwear and jewellery. The owners are a good source of information on the area, and also have several **motorbikes**, which they rent out at B150 for the day (B200/24hr, B1000/week). *Sawatdee* guesthouse (see below) has a **car** for rent, costing from B1800/day, while Sukorn Beach Bungalows and Tours (see above) can arrange hire of an air-con minibus with driver, for around B2000 a day. You can connect to the **Internet** at, for example, *Wunderbar* (see below) and Gigabyte opposite the *Koh Teng Hotel* on Thanon Rama VI.

Accommodation

Trang's **hotels** and **guest houses** are concentrated along Thanon Rama VI and Thanon Wisetkul. The owners of Ani's (see above) also own a quiet, fan-cooled house with an attractive terrace, kitchen and cold-water bathroom, five minutes' walk from the shop; you can rent a room (③) or the whole house for the night, or rent it for a longer period.

Koh Teng Hotel 77–79 Thanon Rama VI ⓣ075 218622 or 075 218148. Styling itself, with some justification, as a "Five-Star Backpackers", this 1940s Chinese hotel has been smartly renovated, offering large, clean en-suite rooms, some with cable TV and air-con, above a popular restaurant and coffee shop, serving Thai, Chinese and Western food. Fan ①, air-con ②

MP Resort Hotel About 2km east of the centre on the Phatthalung road ⓣ075 214230–45, ⓕ075 211177. Among several luxury hotels in Trang town, this grandiose white edifice – built to resemble a cruise liner – stands out, with Thai, Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese restaurants, a pool, golf driving range, sauna, tennis court and fitness centre on offer. ⑥

Sawatdee Thanon Wisetkul ⓣ089 728 4386. Friendly, helpful, family-style guest house in a concrete shophouse, where you're free to use the kitchen – or you can order Western breakfasts. Rooms come with some nice decorative touches, fans and shared hot-water bathrooms. The owner can organize one-day tours by car to local waterfalls and caves. Decent rates for singles. ②

Thumrin Hotel Thanon Rama VI near the station ⓣ075 211011–5, ⓦwww.thumrin.co.th. Formerly the top hotel in town, now offering international-standard facilities – air-con, hot water and TV – at bargain prices, in a high-rise block above its popular coffee shop. ③

Trang Hotel 134/2–5 Thanon Wisetkul ⓣ075 218944, ⓕ075 218451. Good, welcoming choice in the moderate range, on the corner of Thanon Rama VI overlooking the clocktower, with large, comfortable twin rooms with air-con, hot water and TV. ③

Yamawa Guesthouse Thanon Wisetkul ☎075 216617. Large, attractive rooms above a massage shop in the same block as *Sawatdee*, either fan-cooled with shared hot showers or air-conditioned and en-suite, all with cable TV; decent rate for singles. Fan ②, air-con ③

Eating and drinking

Trang's streets are dotted with dozens of traditional cafés, which serve up gallons of **kopii** (local filtered coffee) accompanied by various titbits and light meals. Most famous of these is the local delicacy, **muu yaang**, delicious barbecued pork, which is generally eaten for breakfast. At the excellent **night market**, around the back of the city hall on Thanon Ruenrom, you can try another tasty southern dish, *khanom jiin*, soft noodles topped with hot, sweet or fishy sauces and eaten with crispy greens.

Courtyard restaurants Thanon Wisetkul, north of the clocktower. A good bet at any time of the day or evening – four simple, very cheap restaurants with outdoor tables in a quiet, alley-courtyard, offering tray dishes, noodles, rice, soups and a few more substantial mains.

German Beer House 342 Thanon Huay Yod, on the right, about 1km from the centre beyond the bus terminal ☎087 283 0454. Smart farang bolthole, with a small patio out front for the evenings, producing excellent, unpretentious Western food such as steaks, burgers, chicken cordon bleu, German sausages and *sauerkraut*. Imported German and English beers.

The Meeting Point Thanon Sathanee. Smart, well-run spot, catering largely to foreigners, with espresso coffee, pancakes, pasta, burgers, pizzas, steaks and a large menu of seafood and other Thai dishes.

Namui 130 Thanon Rama VI. Large, clean institution serving very tasty and quite reasonably priced Chinese food, with seafood a speciality; ignore the unprepossessing interior and head straight through the restaurant to the creeper-covered patio, waterfall and outdoor seating at the back.

Sin-o-cha Next to the station at 25/25–26 Thanon Sathanee. Very popular, updated traditional café: *kopii* with Thai cakes and main courses, or espresso, various teas, Western breakfasts, and even baguettes and ciabattas. Daily 7am–7pm.

Wang Jaa Thanon Huay Yod, near the Hat Yai minibus office. Simple café renowned for its *muu yaang*, but also serving *salapao* (Chinese buns), dim sum and, of course, *kopii*. Daily 5am–2pm.

Wunderbar Bottom end of Thanon Rama VI, near the station. Multipurpose farang bar-restaurant that serves a wide selection of drinks (including imported beers), Thai food, and salads, burgers, pizzas and other Western favourites. Also acts as a travel agent, especially for island bookings, and offers Internet and reasonably priced overseas calls.

Mainland Trang

From Ban Pak Meng, 40km due west of Trang town, to the mouth of the Trang River runs a thirty-kilometre stretch of lovely **beaches**, broken only by dramatic limestone outcrops pitted with explorable **caves**. Sea-canoeing day-trips through the mangroves to the impressive cave of Tham Chao Mai can be arranged, notably through *Had Yao Nature Resort* at Ban Chao Mai. Air-conditioned **minibuses** run from Trang to Pak Meng in the north, and via Hat Yao to Ban Chao Mai in the south, but if you want to explore the whole coastline, you'll need to rent a motorbike or car in Trang.

Away from the beach, **inland** Trang Province has plenty to offer too, including **trekking** and **rafting** excursions, most taking in some of the myriad caves and waterfalls that are scattered though the province. Libong Travel, 59/1 Thanon Tha Klang (☎075 217642 or 075 214676, ⓦwww.libongtravel.net), offer a particularly wide range of trips, including a three-day, two-night jungle trek up to the peak of nearby Phu Pha Mek from Sairoong waterfall (B1800/person, minimum 6 people), and a day-trip to three waterfalls and Tham Le (aka Khao Kob), a dramatic inland system of caverns accessed by boat (B750).

The coast: Pak Meng to Ban Chao Mai

Although it has a fine outlook to the headlands and islands to the west, the beach at **PAK MENG** is certainly not the most attractive on the coast, a rather muddy strip of sand truncated at its northern end by a busy pier and to the south by a promenade and sea wall. However, if it's just a day on the sand you're after, and a meal at one of the many tree-shaded foodstalls and simple eateries that line the back of the beach, it's not at all bad. Getting to Pak Meng takes about an hour on one of the air-con **minibuses** that leave when full (roughly half-hourly; B50) from Thanon Tha Klang in Trang. If you need **to stay**, the nicest place is the *Lay Trang Resort*, a stone's throw from the pier (Ⓣ075 274027–8, Ⓦwww.laytrang.com; fan ③, air-con ⑥); its smart brick rooms with en-suite bathrooms, ranged around a large, peaceful garden, come with fan and cold water or air-con, TV, fridge and hot water, and it has a pleasant, reasonably priced restaurant that's locally renowned for its seafood.

Immediately south of Pak Meng's beach is the white sand of **Hat Chang Lang**, famous for its oysters, which shelters at its north end the finest luxury hotel in the province, *Amari Trang Beach Resort* (Ⓣ075 205888, Ⓦwww.amari.com; ⑨). The low-rise blocks of stylish bedrooms with large balconies are set behind a line of casuarina trees, and facilities encompass a beautiful large pool, an excellent Thai restaurant, a spa and a fitness centre. Watersports on offer include kayaking, windsurfing and sailing rental and lessons, and there's a huge range of other activities laid on, notably yoga, t'ai chi, cooking and Thai-language lessons and some interesting local tours. In addition, the hotel has its own beach club on the main strand on Ko Kradan (see p.497), reached by daily longtail transfer, with watersports available and a great little restaurant. About 1km down Hat Chang Lang is the much simpler *Chang Lang Resort* (Ⓣ075 213369, Ⓕ075 291008; fan ③, air-con ④), a pleasant resort with attached restaurant, set back from the beach just off the main road; smallish rooms in well-built concrete bungalows, some air-conditioned, all come with en-suite bathrooms, TVs and verandas.

△ Typical Trang beach scenery

Three kilometres further on is the turning for the **headquarters** of the **Hat Chao Mai National Park** (entry B200; ☎075 213260), which covers 230 square kilometres, including the islands of Mook and Kradan and the entire stretch of coastline from Pak Meng down to Ban Chao Mai. At the headquarters there's a simple café as well as bungalows for two–six people (B800–1500), or you can rent a two-person (B150) or three-person (B225) tent to pitch under the casuarinas at the back of the sandy beach (bedding B60 extra per person). From HQ a short trail leads to the south end of the beach and a viewpoint partway up a karst pinnacle, from which you can see Ko Mook and occasionally dugong (manatees) in the bay below.

Four kilometres south of Hat Chang Lang, beyond Kuantunku, the pier for Ko Mook, is **Hat Yong Ling**. This quiet and attractive convex beach, which shelters a national park ranger station, is probably the nicest along this stretch of coast, with a large cave which you can swim into at high tide or walk into at low tide. Immediately beyond comes **Hat Yao**, which runs in a broad five-kilometre white-sand strip, backed by casuarina trees and some simple restaurants. Next up is **Hat Chao Mai**, where *Sinchai's Chaomai Resort* (☎081 396 4838 or 075 203034; fan ②–④, air-con ④–⑥) occupies a shady, scenic spot hard up against a great lump of karst at the western end of the beach. It's very relaxed and friendly, but accommodation is mostly ramshackle, including some very basic rooms sharing bathrooms at the back of the compound, though there are some smart, large, new bungalows with air-con. The owners rustle up tasty Thai and Western meals, especially seafood, rent out kayaks and snorkelling equipment, and can arrange boat tours to the nearby islands and caves.

A short walk away from *Sinchai's* is the Muslim village of **BAN CHAO MAI**, a straggle of mostly thatched houses on stilts, which exists on fishing, especially for crabs. Roughly half-hourly air-conditioned **minibuses** (B50) from Thanon Tha Klang (same stand as for Pak Meng) in Trang via Hat Yao take about an hour to reach Ban Chao Mai, from whose harbour boats run regularly across to Ko Libong. By the harbour, the distinctive green tin-roofed 🏃 *Had Yao Nature Resort* (☎075 203012, 075 207934 or 081 894 6936, Ⓦwww.trangsea.com; fan ②, air-con ④) is an efficiently run, eco-friendly resort whose aims are nature conservation and helping the local communities. The same people own the *Libong Nature Beach Resort*, covered on p.499, and a resort on an organic farm on Highway 4 between Trang and Krabi, where you can learn to make soap, candles, aloe vera, honey and batiks. Dorm beds in the large house cost B200, and there are also some fan-cooled rooms with shared bath, as well as nicer self-contained rooms and bungalows with hot water and air-con, some of which have balconies over the canal. The breezy, waterside **restaurant** serves up Western breakfasts, vegetarian food and excellent squid and other seafood dishes; **bikes** can be rented at the hostel for B200 per day. The owners organize tours to the local islands, including highly recommended trips to Ko Libong (see p.498), and to **Tham Chao Mai**, a nearby cave which is large enough to enter by boat; inside are impressively huge rock pillars and a natural theatre, its stage framed by rock curtains. Tham Chao Mai can be visited on a fully insured trip with a longtail and local guide (B950, including lunch) or you can rent a **kayak** (B600/day) and guide yourself with a map and torch.

The Trang islands

Much nicer than the mainland beaches – and more geared towards foreign tourists – are the fantastic **islands** off the coast of Trang. Generally blessed with blinding white beaches, great coral and amazing marine life, these islands have managed, with at most a handful of resorts on each, to cling onto that illusory desert-island atmosphere which better-known places like Phuket and Samui lost long ago. **Access** to the islands, as described in the accounts below, is improving all the time, not least in the shape of **day-trip boats from Ko Lanta** (see p.469), which will drop travellers off on **Ko Hai**, **Ko Mook** or **Ko Kradan** for around B400/person. **Accommodation**, much of which is in the moderate price range, is now often fully booked at peak times. Nearly all the resorts open year-round, though in practice many can't be reached out of season (roughly June–Oct) due to treacherous seas. It's sensible to phone ahead, either to the place you want to stay or to its office in Trang town, to check whether they're open or have vacancies, and in many cases to arrange transfers to the resort from Trang.

If you just fancy a day exploring the islands, any travel agent in Trang can book you on a **boat trip** (mid-Oct to mid-May only) to the Emerald Cave on Ko Mook, Ko Hai, Ko Cheuak ("Robe Island", so named after its limestone folds) and other small nearby islands for snorkelling, for B1050 per person including admission to Hat Chao Mai National Park, packed lunch and soft drinks; snorkelling gear is available and the boat will drop you off at one of the islands if you wish. **Scuba-diving** is available on Ko Hai and Ko Mook, while Paddle Asia (Ⓦpaddleasia.com) run four- to six-day **sea-kayaking** trips around the Trang islands costing US$675–850. Bangkok-based adventure travel company X-Site (895 Pornpailin Business Point, Thanon On Nut, Thanon Sukhumvit; Ⓣ02 730 0935, Ⓦwww.xsitediving.com), run three-day **scuba-diving**, **snorkelling** or **rock-climbing** trips to **Ko Lao Lieng**, beautiful, twin desert islands to the south near Ko Sukorn; all-in costs range from US$150 to 170, including kayaking and fishing in your down time, camping in luxury tents on Lao Lieng and transfers from Trang.

Ko Hai (Ko Ngai)

KO HAI (aka **KO NGAI**), 16km southwest of Pak Meng, is the most developed of the Trang islands, though it's still decidedly low-key. The island's action, such as it is, centres on the east coast, where half a dozen resorts enjoy a dreamy panorama of jagged limestone outcrops, whose crags glow pink and blue against the setting sun, stretching across the sea to the mainland behind. The gently sloping beach of fine, white sand here stretches unbroken for over two kilometres, and there's some good snorkelling in the shallow, clear water off the island's southeastern tip. For the best snorkelling in the region, the resorts run **boat trips** every day in high season (from B400/person) to Ko Cheuak, Ko Maa and Ko Waen, just off Ko Hai to the east, where you can swim into caverns and explore a fantastic variety of multicoloured soft and hard coral; these trips also take in Ko Mook's Emerald Cave. *Koh Ngai Villa* also runs day-trips to the popular snorkelling and diving site of Ko Rok (see p.469), 30km southwest in the Mu Ko Lanta National Park, for B900/person. You'll find that such boat trips, as well as massages and other extras, are considerably pricier at the island's more upmarket resorts.

As there's no village on Ko Hai, there's no demand for regular, scheduled **boats** to serve the islanders. Instead, the resorts lay on boats from Pak Meng, typically charging B250/person in a longtail (45min–1hr), B450/person in a speedboat (20min), fed by transfers from Trang town or airport for B150 (some also offer pick-ups from Krabi airport).

Snorkelling equipment (around B150/day) and **kayaks** (B500/day for a one-seater, B700 for a two-seater) can be rented at most of the resorts. *Fantasy Resort* has a well-organized **dive shop**, the German-run Rainbow Divers (Ⓦwww.rainbow-diver.com), while *Ko Ngai Resort* is home to Sea Breeze (with an office in

Trang at 59/1 Thanon Sathanee ⓣ075 217460, ⓦwww.seabreeze.co.th), which as well as diving and kayaking, offers **windsurfing**.

Accommodation

Ko Hai now has the whole gamut of **accommodation**, from simple, en-suite bamboo bungalows to swanky, air-con cottages, and there are even two-person tents available (B250), erected under thatched, A-frame shelters, at *Ko Hai Seafood*, a restaurant on the south side of *Fantasy Resort*.

Coco Cottage Towards the northern end of the main beach ⓣ089 724 9225 or 081 693 6457, ⓦwww.coco-cottage.com; Trang office at 80 Thanon Huay Yod. Charming, helpful and family-friendly resort in a palm grove, where the stylish, thatched wooden bungalows sport verandas, mosquito nets and outdoor bathrooms with wooden basins and bamboo showers. Very good restaurant and beach bar, Internet access and occasional yoga courses. Fan ⑦, air-con ⑧

Fantasy Resort Towards the southern end of the main beach ⓣ075 206960–2, ⓦwww.kohhai.com; Trang office on Thanon Sathanee ⓣ075 215923. The largest resort on Ko Hai is rather institutional, without much of an island feel. The swanky rooms and bungalows, all with mini-bars, some with air-con, hot water and TVs, are quite tightly packed but have some nice decorative touches. There's a spa, swimming pool and pricey Internet access. Fan ⑦, air-con ⑦–⑨

Ko Hai Paradise Resort Ao Kauntong on the south coast ⓣ075 203024, ⓔkohhaiparadise@yahoo.com; Trang office at *The Meeting Point* ⓣ075 216420 or 075 218535 (see p.492). With this tranquil bay to themselves, the functional but well-maintained, en-suite bungalows are sheltered by tall palms in spacious, grassy grounds. The food's good and the long, white-sand beach slopes down towards some great coral for snorkelling right in front of the resort. They provide their own longtail transfer from Trang via Kuantunku pier (B300/person). ③

Ko Ngai Resort On the east coast by the island's jetty ⓣ075 206924–6, ⓦwww.kohngairesort.com; Trang office on Thanon Sathanee ⓣ075 590035. This traditional-style resort, the first on the island, occupies its own small, shady, sandy cove, to the south of the main beach (10min walk along a path around the rocky headland). Besides a swimming pool and a good restaurant, it has a spread of upmarket accommodation, some of it in a rather ugly, two-storey block, ranging from fan-cooled en-suite rooms to air-conditioned, thatched beachside bungalows with large wooden verandas, spacious bathrooms, hot water, TVs and mini-bars. Fan ⑦, air-con ⑦–⑨

Koh Ngai Villa Near the centre of the main beach ⓣ075 203263, ⓦwww.krabidir.com/kohngaivilla; Trang office at 112 Thanon Rama VI ⓣ075 210496. Friendly, old-style beach resort with plenty of space. Simple, well-organized bamboo bungalows boast verandas and small toilets, or you could opt for a smart concrete bungalow or room in a concrete longhouse, or even a two-person tent (B200, including bedding). ②–⑤

Thapwarin Resort Towards the northern end of the main beach ⓣ075 203169 or 081 894 3585, ⓦwww.thapwarin.com; Trang office at 140/2 Thanon Rongrien ⓣ075 220139. Welcoming, shady resort, where you can choose between thatched, bamboo and rattan cottages with outdoor bathrooms, and large, very smart wooden bungalows boasting air-con as well as hot water and miniature gardens in their spacious bathrooms. Internet access, beach bar and good restaurant, serving Thai and Western food and espresso coffee. Fan ⑦, air-con ⑧

Ko Mook

KO MOOK, about 8km southeast of Ko Hai, supports a comparatively busy fishing village on its eastern side, around which the beaches are disappointing, often reduced to dirty mud flats when the tide goes out. However, across on the island's west coast lies beautiful **Hat Farang**, with gently shelving white sand, crystal-clear water that's good for swimming and snorkelling, and gorgeous sunsets. The island's main source of renown is **Tham Morakhot**, the stunning "Emerald Cave" further north on the west coast, which can only be visited by boat, but shouldn't be missed. An eighty-metre swim through the cave – 10m or so of which is in pitch-darkness – brings you to an inland beach of powdery sand open to the sky, at the base of a spectacular natural chimney whose walls are coated with dripping vegetation. Unless you're a nervous swimmer, avoid the organized tours on bigger boats offered by some of the resorts on nearby islands, and charter your own longtail instead: you won't get lifejackets and torches, but the boatman will swim through the cave with you and – if you're lucky – you'll avoid the tours and get the inland beach all to yourself, an experience not to be forgotten.

The easiest way to **get there** is to book a minibus-and-boat package to Hat Farang through one of the resort offices or travel agents in Trang, which cost B300, including the thirty-minute longtail ride; *Charlie's* offer the alternative of a fifteen-minute speedboat transfer (B400 from Trang town, B450 from the airport). Otherwise, there's a pretty reliable boat (B60) at around midday to Ko Mook's village from Kuantunku pier, 8km south of Pak Meng, between Hat Chang Lang and Hat Yong Ling; Ban Chao Mai air-con minibuses from Trang charge around B100 to detour to Kuantunku; once landed at the village, you're left with a thirty-minute walk or B50 motorbike-taxi ride over to Hat Farang.

Accommodation

With most of Hat Farang to itself, the nicest of the **bungalow** outfits here is 🏃 *Charlie's* (Ⓣ075 203281–2; Trang office at 17 Thanon Sathanee Ⓣ075 217671–2; Ⓦwww.kohmook.com; fan ⑤–⑥, air-con ⑦), a well-run establishment offering very smart bamboo huts that share a spotlessly clean shower block, as well as attractive concrete en-suite cottages, some with hot water and air-con. The recommended restaurant serves good coffee and a huge variety of Western and Thai food, including local dishes and plenty of seafood, and there are Internet, exchange and overseas phone facilities. You can rent kayaks, have a massage or take a **boat trip**, either to Tham Morakhot and around Ko Mook or to neighbouring islands (from B400/person); the owners plan to build a freshwater swimming pool, so prices will probably go up. If all that isn't enough for you, there's a **dive shop** (Ⓦwww.princessdivers.com) offering courses, local dives off Ko Mook, Ko Kradan and Ko Waen, and trips by speedboat to sites such as Hin Daeng and Hin Muang.

At the rocky, northern end of the beach, *Sawaddee*'s en-suite concrete or stilted wooden bungalows (Ⓣ075 207964–5, Ⓔsawaddeeresort64@yahoo.com; or contact *Wunderbar* in Trang – see p.492; ④–⑤) are less stylish, but enjoy plenty of shade and largely uninterrupted sea views. There are also a few good places on the attractive, shady slopes behind the beach: friendly *Hat Farang* (Ⓣ087 884 4785; ③) offers simple but clean en-suite huts, as well as good food, including Western breakfasts and a *matsaman* curry speciality; *Rubber Tree* (Ⓣ075 203284 or 081 270 4148; ③) has well-maintained, thatched, en-suite bungalows in a small plantation and runs regular, reasonably priced **boat trips to Ko Rok** (see p.469); and at *Mookies* some enterprising Australians have set up comfortable tents, each pitched under a semi-permanent shelter with a bed and table (②).

Ko Kradan

About 6km to the southwest of Ko Mook, **KO KRADAN** is the remotest of the inhabited islands off Trang, and one of the most beautiful, with crystal-clear waters. On this slender, hilly triangle of thick jungle, the main beach is a long strand of steeply sloping, powdery sand on the east coast, with fine views of Ko Mook, Ko Libong and the karst-strewn mainland, and an offshore reef to the north with a great variety of hard coral. From the *Amari Trang's* beach club (see p.493) towards the south end of this beach, a path across the island will bring you after about fifteen minutes to Sunset Beach, another lovely stretch of fine, white sand in a cove; a branch off this path at *Paradise Lost* (see below) leads to a beach on the short south coast, which enjoys good reef snorkelling (also about 15min from the *Amari* beach club).

Accommodation

Kradan's best **accommodation** option is *Paradise Lost* (ⓣ089 587 2409; ③–⑤), in the middle of the island, roughly halfway along the path to Sunset Beach. In a grassy, palm-shaded grove, it offers simple, thatched rattan bungalows with shared bathrooms or larger, wooden, en-suite affairs, as well as massages and good Thai and Western food. Phone to arrange a boat (B700) from Kuantunku pier, which is accessible by air-con minibus from Trang (see p.497). On the east coast lies the uninspiring *Ko Kradan Paradise Beach Resort* (ⓣ075 211367, ⓦwww.kradanisland.com; Trang office at 28–30 Thanon Sathanee ⓣ075 211391; ④–⑥), with poorly maintained concrete rooms and bungalows and little shade. Transfers from their Trang office cost B350/person, and the resort can arrange **boat trips** to the neighbouring islands (from B550/person). At the south end of the main beach there's a Hat Chao Mai National Park ranger station, with a few tents to rent (B300 for two people, B400 for three–four people, including bedding), a couple of basic rooms with shared bathrooms (④) and plans to build some bungalows (contact the park's headquarters for information – see p.494).

Ko Libong

The largest of the Trang islands, **KO LIBONG**, lies 10km southeast of Ko Mook, opposite Ban Chao Mai on the mainland. Less visited than its northern neighbours, it's known mostly for its wildlife, although it has its fair share of golden beaches too. Libong is one of the most significant remaining refuges in Thailand of the **dugong** (also known as the manatee), a large marine mammal which feeds on sea grasses growing on the sea floor – the sea-grass meadow around Libong is reckoned to be the largest in Southeast Asia. Sadly, dugongs are now an endangered species, traditionally hunted for their blubber (used as fuel) and meat, and increasingly affected by fishing practices such as scooping, and by coastal pollution which destroys their source of food. The dugong has now been adopted as one of fifteen "reserved animals" of Thailand and is the official mascot of Trang province, but it remains to be seen how effective methods of conservation will be, especially with tourist interest in the dugong growing all the time.

Libong is also well known for its migratory **birds**, which stop off here on their way south from Siberia, drawn by the island's food-rich mud flats (now protected by the Libong Archipelago Sanctuary, which covers the eastern third of the island). For those seriously interested in ornithology, the best time to come is during March and April, when you can expect to see crab plovers, great knots, Eurasian curlews, bar-tailed godwits, brown-winged kingfishers, masked finfoots and even the rare black-necked stork, not seen elsewhere on the Thai–Malay peninsula.

Libong Nature Beach Resort runs award-winning, environmentally friendly, day-long **boat trips** (B2000/person, or B600/person in a group of six or more), which are also available from their sister resort, *Had Yao Nature Resort*. As well as visiting a *chao ley* village, these give you the chance to kayak into the sanctuary to observe the rare birds and to snorkel at the sea-grass beds – with, they reckon, an eighty percent chance of seeing a dugong.

Practicalities

Boats depart daily year-round from Ban Chao Mai (see p.494) when full (B40–50/person), arriving twenty minutes later at Ban Phrao on Ko Libong; from here motorbike taxis (B80–100) transport you across to Ban Lan Khao and the island's resorts. Alternatively, you can take a boat direct from *Had Yao Nature Resort* in Ban Chao Mai to *Libong Nature Beach Resort* for B200/person.

Ko Libong's two **resorts** are situated on the long, thin strip of golden sand which runs along the southwestern coast, where at low tide the sea retreats for hundreds of metres, exposing rock pools that are great for splashing about in but not so good for a dip. The *Libong Nature Beach Resort* (④) is run by the same team who operate the *Had Yao Nature Resort*, with the same contact details (see p.494). Its neat, brick en-suite bungalows are set slightly back from a secluded stretch of beach, a ten-minute walk south of the fishing village of Ban Lan Khao; there's a good restaurant attached too, and Internet access is available. At *Libong Beach Resort* (Ⓣ075 225205 or 081 477 8609, Ⓦwww.libongbeachresort.com; fan ④, air-con ⑥), on the opposite, northern, side of Ban Lan Khao, a little closer to the clutter of the village, sturdy and smart en-suite bungalows on stilts come with or without air-con, or you can sleep in a tent (B200/night). There's also a reasonable restaurant and a dive shop, and the owner, a friendly local teacher, organizes boat trips and rents out kayaks.

Ko Sukorn

A good way south of the other Trang islands, low-lying **KO SUKORN** lacks the white-sand beaches and beautiful coral of its neighbours, but makes up for it with its friendly inhabitants, laid-back ambience and one excellent resort; for a glimpse of how islanders live and work, this is the place to come.

The lush interior of the island is mainly given over to rubber plantations, interspersed with rice paddies, banana and coconut palms, while Hat Talo Yai, the island's main **beach** – 500m of gently shelving brown sand, backed by coconut

△ Sukorn Beach Bungalows, Ko Sukorn

palms – runs along the southwestern shore. It's here you'll find the outstanding 🏃 *Sukorn Beach Bungalows* (ⓣ075 207707; Trang office at 22 Thanon Sathanee ⓣ075 211457; ⓦwww.sukorn-island-trang.com; fan ④–⑤, air-con ⑥–⑦), one of the few Trang resorts that's reliably accessible all year round (discounts of up to sixty percent are available in low season). The clued-up and congenial Thai-Dutch duo who run the place are keen to keep the resort low-key and work with the locals as much as possible, something that's reflected in the friendly welcome you get all over the island. Attractively decorated and well-designed bungalows and rooms – all spotlessly clean and with en-suite bathrooms, some with hot water – are set around a lush garden dotted with deckchairs and umbrellas, and there's an excellent, well-priced **restaurant**. At the resort, you can access the Internet, make overseas calls, exchange money and get a good massage, and you're free to paddle around in kayaks.

Boat excursions from the resort include trips out to Ko Lao Lieng and Ko Takieng, which are part of the Mu Ko Phetra National Marine Park, for some excellent snorkelling. These run in high season only, when the sea is calm enough; at other times of year you're restricted to fishing trips – and to looking round the island itself, which, at thirty square kilometres, is a good size for exploring. The resort offers **guided tours** (B250 or less per person), or it has motorbikes (half-day B300) and mountain bikes (half-day B150) for rent, as well as a handy map that marks all the sights, including the seafood market and a 150-metre-high viewpoint.

A songthaew-and-boat **transfer to the island** (B130/person) leaves the resort's office in Trang daily at 11am and takes a couple of hours, or you can arrange a private transfer. The resort can also organize pricey longtail-boat transfers to or from any of the nearby islands, and can even put together an all-in island-hopping package, with stays at *Charlie's* on Ko Mook and *Libong Beach Resort*, for B28,900 for two people, most of which goes on your private longtail transfers.

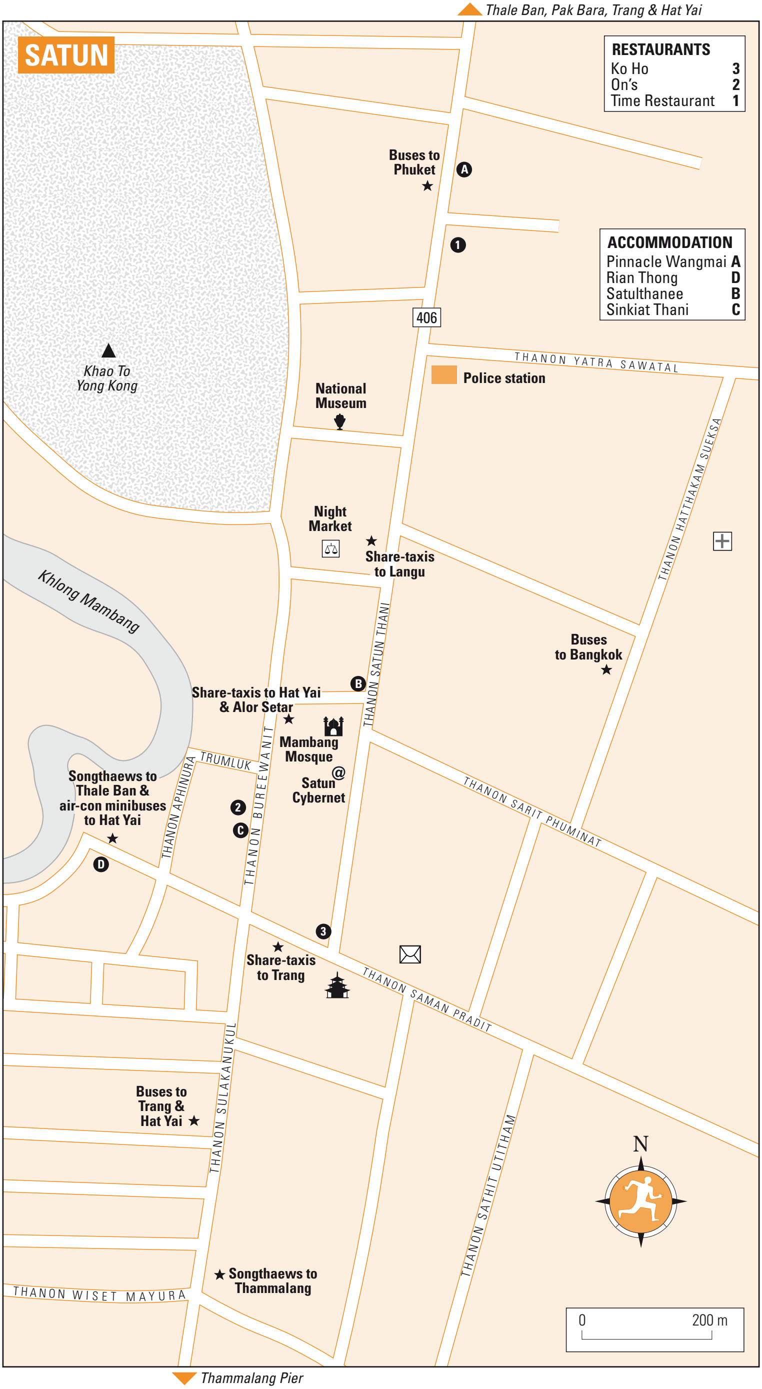
If *Sukorn Beach Bungalows* is not your cup of tea, the best of the rest of the island's handful of resorts is the friendly and peaceful *Ko Sukorn Cabana* (ⓣ089 724 2326, ⓦwww.sukorncabana.com; Trang office at 160/3 Moo 10, Thanon Trang–Palian ⓣ075 225894; ⑤), with large, well-appointed log cabins on a secluded beach to the north of Hat Talo Yai; transfers from Trang can be arranged for B350/person.

Satun province

Satun province may in the coming years be developed as a gateway to Malaysia, away from the troubles further east, but for the moment its sleepy capital, **Satun town**, offers few attractions for the visitor – though it does make a good base for the nearby **Thale Ban National Park**, with its caves, waterfalls and luxuriant jungle. The province's main attraction, however, is the **Ko Tarutao National Marine Park**, with pristine stretches of sand and a fantastic array of marine life, which is served by daily dry-season ferries from the port of **Pak Bara**, which lies off the main Satun–Trang highway. The tiny islands to the north of the national park are much less visited, with the exception of **Ko Bulon Lae**, which has a decent selection of privately run bungalows along its long and beautiful beach.

Satun

Nestling in the last wedge of Thailand's west coast, the remote town of **SATUN** is served by just one road, Highway 406, which approaches through forbidding karst


Thale Ban, Pak Bara, Trang & Hat Yai
SATUN
RESTAURANTS
Ko Ho 3
On's 2
Time Restaurant 1
ACCOMMODATION
Pinnacle Wangmai A
Rian Thong D
Satulthanee B
Sinkiat Thani C
Buses to Phuket
A
1
406
Khao To Yong Kong
National Museum
THANON YATRA SAWATAL
Police station
THANON HATTHAKAM SUEKSA
Night Market
Share-taxis to Langu
Khlong Mambang
THANON SATUN THANI
B
Buses to Bangkok
Share-taxis to Hat Yai & Alor Setar
Mambang Mosque
Satun Cybernet
TRUMLUK
THANON BUREEWANIT
THANON APHINURA
Songthaews to Thale Ban & air-con minibuses to Hat Yai
2
C
D
THANON SARIT PHUMINAT
3
Share-taxis to Trang
THANON SAMAN PRADIT
THANON SULAKANUKUL
Buses to Trang & Hat Yai
THANON SATHIT UTITHAM
N
THANON WISET MAYURA
Songthaews to Thammalang
0
200 m
Thammalang Pier

outcrops. Set in a green valley bordered by limestone hills, the town is leafy and relaxing but not especially interesting: the boat services to and from Kuala Perlis and Langkawi in Malaysia are the main reason for foreigners to come here.

If you find yourself with time on your hands in Satun, it's worth seeking out the **National Museum** (Wed–Sun 9am–4pm; B30) on Soi 5, Thanon Satun Thani, on the north side of the centre. It's memorable, as much as anything else, for its setting, in the graceful **Kuden Mansion**, which was built in British colonial style, with some Thai and Malay features, by craftsmen from Penang, and inaugurated in 1902 as the Satun governor's official residence. The exhibits and audiovisuals in English have a distinctive anthropological tone, but are diverting enough, notably concerning Thai Muslims, the *chao ley* on Ko Lipe, and the Sakai, a dwindling band of nomadic hunter-gatherers who still live in the jungle of southern Thailand.

Practicalities

Frequent **buses** depart for Satun from Thanon Ratsada in Trang, and regular buses also come here from Hat Yai, Phuket and Bangkok. These buses are based at three different locations in Satun, as marked on our map; on their way out of town, those heading for Hat Yai or Trang will pick up passengers in the centre, for example outside the *Sinkiat Thani Hotel*. **Share-taxis** and **air-con minibuses** also have a variety of bases in town, depending on their destination, as marked on our map. **Internet access** and overseas calls are available at Satun CyberNet, 136 Thanon Satun Thani. Next to the *Sinkiat Thani Hotel* at 48 Thanon Bureewanit, *On's* restaurant (☎081 097 9783, Ⓔonmarch13@hotmail.com) can provide **motorbike** (B200–250/day) and **car rental** (B1500/day), as well as local **tourist information**.

Accommodation

Just on the west side of the centre at 4 Thanon Saman Pradit, *Rian Thong* (the hotel sign mistakenly says "Rain Thong"; ☎074 711036; ①) is the best budget **hotel** in Satun; the owners are friendly, and some of the clean, large, en-suite rooms overlook the canal. Moving up a notch, the *Satulthanee* on Thanon Satun Thani by Mambang Mosque (☎074 712309 or 074 711010; fan ①, air-con ②) is a typical Chinese hotel, with spacious, well-kept en-suite rooms, some with air-con and TV and most set back from the main road. The *Pinnacle Wangmai*, north of the centre at 43 Thanon Satun Thani (☎074 711607–8, Ⓦwww.pinnaclehotels.com; ④), fulfils another stereotype, that of a provincial "deluxe" hotel, with air-conditioned rooms in a modern concrete building with hot water, fridges and satellite TV, but

Moving on to Malaysia from Satun

From **Thammalang pier**, 10km south of Satun at the mouth of the river, longtail **boats** leave when full on regular, 45-minute trips (B100/person) to **Kuala Perlis** on the northwest tip of Malaysia, from where there are plentiful transport connections down the west coast. Three ferry boats a day cross from Thammalang to the Malaysian island of **Langkawi** (1hr; B250); you can get information in town from *On's*, or from the ferry office at the pier (☎074 730510–2). Frequent songthaews (B20) run to Thammalang from near the 7–11 supermarket on Thanon Sulakanukul, while motorbike taxis (B50) can be picked up, for example, near the junction of Thanon Saman Pradit and Thanon Bureewanit; both take around fifteen minutes. It's also possible to cross **by road** into Malaysia at Thale Ban National Park, either with your own transport or if you take a share-taxi to **Alor Setar** from Thanon Bureewanit, next to Mambang Mosque in Satun.

no distinctive features. With the same facilities but far more central and preferable is the *Sinkiat Thani*, 50 Thanon Bureewanit (ⓣ074 721055–8, ⓔsinkiathotel@hotmail.com; ④), where large, carpeted bedrooms offer good views over the surrounding countryside.

Eating and drinking

A good option for moderately priced Thai and Western **food** is the air-conditioned *Time Restaurant*, which is suitably decorated with nostalgic antiques, next door to the *Pinnacle Wangmai Hotel* on Thanon Satun Thani. *On's* simple bar-restaurant (see opposite) offers good American breakfasts, sandwiches and a short menu of typical Thai dishes. For a meal in the evening, however, you can't do much better than the lively and very popular night market, north of the centre on the west side of Thanon Satun Thani, or try *Ko Ho*, on Thanon Saman Pradit opposite the Chinese temple, a cheap, busy restaurant that serves tasty Thai and Chinese food, including plenty of fish, seafood and salads.

Thale Ban National Park

Spread over rainforested mountains along the Malaysian border, **THALE BAN NATIONAL PARK** is a pristine nature reserve which shelters a breathtaking variety of wildlife: from tapirs, Malayan sun bears, clouded leopards and barking tree frogs, to butterflies, which proliferate in March, and unusual birds such as bat hawks, booted eagles and flamboyant argus pheasants. Unfortunately for naturalists and casual visitors alike, few trails have been marked out through the jungle, but the lush, peaceful setting and the views and bathing pools of the Yaroy waterfall are enough to justify the trip.

Songthaews leave from opposite the *Rian Thong* hotel in Satun when they have enough people (most likely in the early morning), passing through the village of Wang Prachan and reaching Thale Ban **headquarters** (ⓣ074 722736–7), 2km further on, in an hour. Otherwise, get off any bus along Highway 406 between Satun and Hat Yai at Ban Khwan Sator, 19km north of Satun, from where motorbike taxis (B100 one way) make the twenty-kilometre journey along Highway 4184 to Thale Ban.

Hemmed in by steep, verdant hills and spangled with red water lilies, the **lake** by the headquarters is central to the story that gives the park its name. Local legend tells how a villager once put his *ban* (headscarf) on a tree stump to have a rest; this caused a landslide, the lake appeared from nowhere, and he, the stump and the *ban* tumbled into it. The water is now surrounded by **bungalows** with hot showers (B600–2500/night depending on size), a **campsite** (B30/person/night) with showers and toilets, and a decent small **restaurant**.

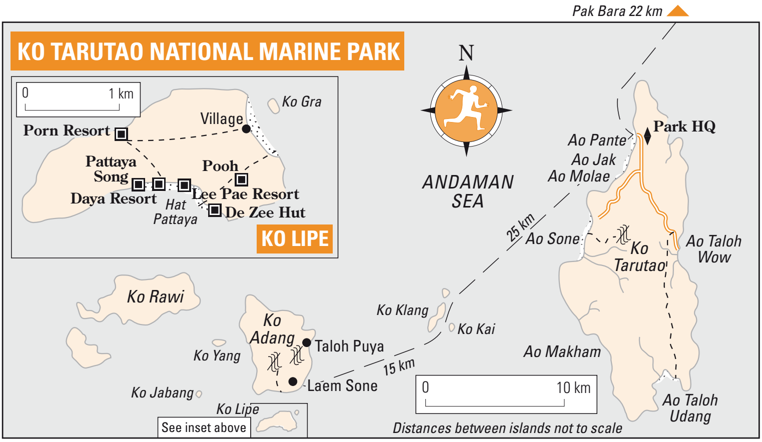
There used to be an interesting, sixteen-kilometre jungle walk from the headquarters to Yaroy waterfall, but the path has now grown over and is closed, though it may reopen in the future. All that's currently left are two short circular **trails** (700m and 1300m) from the headquarters, on which you're likely to see birds, gibbons and snakes. A little further afield is **Tham Tondin**, a low, sweaty stalactite cave, about 2km north of headquarters just off the road to Khwan Sator, that gradually slopes down for 800m to deep water. A more compelling jaunt, however, is to **Yaroy waterfall** – bring swimming gear for the pools above the main fall. Take the main road north from the headquarters through the narrow, idyllic valley for 6km (beyond the village of Wang Prachan) and follow the sign to the right. After 700m, you'll find the main, lower fall set in screeching jungle. Climbing the path on the left side, you reach what seems like the top, with fine views of the steep, green peaks to the west. However, there's more: further up the stream are a series of gorgeous shady pools, where you can bathe and shower under the six-metre falls.

Ko Tarutao National Marine Park

The unspoilt **KO TARUTAO NATIONAL MARINE PARK** is probably the most beautiful of all Thailand's accessible beach destinations. Occupying 1400 square kilometres of the Andaman Sea, the park covers 51 mostly uninhabited islands, of which three are easy to reach from the mainland and offer accommodation for visitors. Site of the park headquarters, **Ko Tarutao** offers the widest variety of accommodation and things to do, while **Ko Adang** is much more low-key and a springboard to some excellent snorkelling. Home to a population of around seven hundred *chao ley* (see p.370), **Ko Lipe** is something of a frontier maverick, attracting ever more backpackers with one dazzling beach, ten or so private bungalow resorts and a rough-and-ready atmosphere. The port of **Pak Bara** is currently the only jumping-off point for the park, and houses a **national park visitor centre** (☎074 783485 or 074 783597), set back on the left just before the pier, where you can gather information and book a room before boarding your boat.

The park's forests and seas support an incredible variety of **fauna**: langurs, crab-eating macaques and wild pigs are common on the islands, which also shelter several unique subspecies of squirrel, tree shrew and lesser mouse deer; among the hundred-plus bird species found here, reef egrets and hornbills are regularly seen, while white-bellied sea eagles, frigate birds and pied imperial pigeons are more rarely encountered; and the park is the habitat of about 25 percent of the world's tropical fish species, as well as marine mammals such as the dugong, sperm whale and dolphins. The islands are also home to dwindling populations of Olive Ridley, green, hawksbill and leatherback **turtles** (see box opposite), with Ao Sone on Ko Tarutao the main nesting beach, especially in January.

The park amenities on Tarutao and Adang are officially **closed** to tourists in the monsoon season from mid-May to mid-November (the exact dates vary from year to year). Most of the resorts on Ko Lipe close at this time too, and the frequency of the ferry service is reduced to one a week. Accommodation is especially likely to get full around the three New Years (Thai, Chinese and Western), when it's best to book national park rooms in advance in Bangkok (see p.49).


Pak Bara 22 km
KO TARUTAO NATIONAL MARINE PARK
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Ao Taloh Wow
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Ko Kai
Ko Yang
Taloh Puya
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Ao Makham
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Ko Jabang
Ko Lipe
See inset above
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10 km
Ao Taloh Udang
Distances between islands not to scale

Turtles in Thailand

Thailand is home to four species of **marine turtle**: the green, the leatherback, the Olive Ridley and the hawksbill. The loggerhead turtle also once swam in Thai waters, until the constant plundering of its eggs rendered it locally extinct. Of the remaining four species, the **green turtle** is the commonest, a mottled brown creature named not for its appearance but for the colour of the soup made from its flesh. Adults weigh up to 180kg and are herbivorous, subsisting on sea grass, mangrove leaves and algae. The **leatherback**, encased in a distinctive ridged shell, is the world's largest turtle, weighing in at between 250kg and 550kg; it eats nothing but jellyfish. The small **Olive Ridley** weighs up to 50kg and feeds mainly on shrimps and crabs. Named for its peculiar beak-like mouth, the **hawksbill** is prized for its spectacular carapace (the sale of which was banned by CITES in 1992); it weighs up to 75kg and lives off a type of sea sponge.

The survival of the remaining four species is by no means assured – prized for their meat, their shells and their eggs, and the frequent victims of trawler nets, all types of marine turtle are now **endangered species**. The worldwide population of female turtles is thought to be as small as 70,000 to 75,000, and only around fifty percent of hatchlings reach adulthood. As a result, several of the Thai beaches most favoured by egg-laying turtles have been protected as **marine parks**, and some are equipped with special hatcheries. The breeding season usually starts in October or November and lasts until February, and the astonishing egg-laying ritual can be witnessed, under national park rangers' supervision, on Ko Surin Tai (see p.371) and Ko Tarutao.

Broody female turtles of all species always return to the beach on which they were born to lay their **eggs**, often travelling hundreds of kilometres to get there – no mean feat, considering that females can wait anything from twenty to fifty years before reproducing. Once *in situ*, the turtles lurk in the water and wait for a cloudy night before wending their laborious way onto and up the beach: at 180kg, the green turtles have a hard enough time, but the 550kg leatherbacks endure an almost impossible uphill struggle. Choosing a spot well above the high-tide mark, each turtle digs a deep nest in the sand into which she lays ninety or more eggs; she then packs the hole with the displaced sand and returns to sea. Tears often stream down the turtle's face at this point, but they're a means of flushing out sand from the eyes and nostrils, not a manifestation of grief.

Many females come back to land three or four times during the nesting season, laying a new batch of ninety-plus eggs at every sitting. Incubation of each batch takes from fifty to sixty days, and the temperature of the sand during this period determines the sex of the hatchling: warm sand results in females, cooler sand in males. When the **baby turtles** finally emerge from their eggshells, they immediately and instinctively head seawards, guided both by the moonlight on the water – which is why any artificial light, such as flashlight beams or camera flashes, can disorientate them – and by the downward gradient of the beach.

The prime **dive sites** in the park are to the west of Ko Tarutao, around Ko Klang, Ko Adang, Ko Rawi and Ko Dong, where encounters with reef and even whale sharks, dolphins, stingrays and turtles are not uncommon. These are now served by two reliable, foreign-run **dive shops** on Ko Lipe, the long-established Sabye Sports at *Porn Resort* (see p.510), and Lotus at *Pooh's* (see p.509), which both offer day-trips to around thirty sites, as well as a wide range of PADI courses. **Snorkelling gear** can be rented at Pak Bara visitor centre or on Ko Adang for B50 per day, and is widely available from the private bungalow outfits or dive shops on Ko Lipe. For watery adventures above the surface, Paddle Asia (Ⓦ paddleasia.com) organizes four- to eight-day, small-group **sea-kayaking** trips around the Tarutao islands, costing US$580–1275 per person.

Ferries

Ferry services into the park seem to change by the year, due to competition between the boat companies and local politicking; there have also been services in the past from Thammalang pier, 10km south of Satun town, which may possibly reappear. For up-to-date **information**, call the Pak Bara National Park Visitor Centre; the friendly and helpful Langu Tourist Boat Association, a cooperative of many of the local boat-owners, which has an office on the left-hand corner right opposite Pak Bara pier (ⓣ089 655 8090 or 081 609 1413); or one of the ferry agents at the pier, such as Andrew Tour (ⓣ074 783459 or 081 897 8482). Note that there is no pier on Adang or Lipe, so boats anchor in the channel between the islands or off Hat Pattaya where they're met by **longtails** (B30–40 to any beach on Lipe or the Adang park station). The pier at Ao Pante on Tarutao is inaccessible at low tide, when longtails (B20) shuttle people to shore.

In season, ferries currently leave **Pak Bara** at around 11am and 2pm daily for Ao Pante on Ko Tarutao (1hr or more on most boats; B250 one way), before continuing to Ko Adang and Ko Lipe (B500–550 from Pak Bara), 40km and about two hours west of Ko Tarutao. There's also a 10.30am ferry via Ko Bulon Lae (see p.510) to Ko Adang and Ko Lipe (about 5hr in total; B500). Coming back to Pak Bara, boats that call in at Ko Tarutao leave Ko Adang and Ko Lipe at around 9am and 10am, those via Ko Bulon Lae at 2pm. On the Pak Bara–Tarutao–Adang route, one fast boat, the *Satun 1*, is currently in operation, cutting the journey time to Tarutao down to thirty minutes or so, to Adang and Lipe to around 2hr. All the operators offer small discounts on return tickets; for the slower boats (not *Satun 1*), you can buy a return ticket to Adang/Lipe for B900 and stop off at Tarutao and/or Bulon Lae. At busy times, there may be additional ferries and speedboats.

At the time of writing, boats **between Ko Lipe and Langkawi**, the large Malaysian island to the southeast, were just starting up. This service, however, is hampered by the lack of an immigration post on Lipe, so the operators generally have to bring over an immigration officer from the mainland to stamp people out of or into Thailand. *Tarutao Cabana Resort* on the east side of Lipe (ⓣ089 150 5350) currently does the one-hour trip four times a week, charging B1000 each way. Sabye Sports (see p.510) also covers this route, especially at weekends, charging B1260.

En route to Tarutao and Bulon Lae: Pak Bara

From Trang, agencies such as Sukorn Beach Bungalows and Tours (see p.491) offer regular direct air-con minibuses to **PAK BARA** in high season (2hr); otherwise you'll need to take a Satun-bound bus (2hr 30min) or share-taxi (1hr 30min) from Thanon Ratsada to the inland town of **Langu** and change there to a red songthaew for the ten-kilometre hop to the port. Frequent buses and taxis **from Satun** make the fifty-kilometre trip to Langu.

Accommodation is available in Pak Bara for people who miss the boats. The best budget choice is the friendly *Bara Guesthouse* (ⓣ074 783097; ②), less than 500m before the pier on the west side of the main road, which offers large, tiled, concrete rooms with their own bathrooms in a garden running down to the sea. Another couple of hundred metres from the pier on the same side of the road and a short way upmarket, the motel-like *Grand Villa* (ⓣ074 783499; ③) provides air-con and TV in its smart, modern, en-suite rooms. On the right just before the pier, *Cherry Delight* is a charming, little daytime **café**, which serves up Western breakfasts and sandwiches, healthy juices and espresso coffee, as well as tasty southern

Thai specialities such as savoury or sweet rotis. There are no banks on the Tarutao islands or Bulon Lae, but Smooth Tours by the pier offers **currency-exchange** facilities, as well as **Internet access**. After a stint on the islands, Pak Bara Travel by the pier (☎081 776 1271) can arrange **air-con minibus** transfers to Trang, Ko Lanta and Krabi in high season.

Ko Tarutao

The largest of the national park's islands, **KO TARUTAO** offers the greatest natural variety: mountains covered in semi-evergreen rainforest rise steeply to a high point of 700m; limestone caves and mangrove swamps dot the shoreline; and the west coast is lined with perfect beaches for most of its 26-kilometre length.

Boats will drop you off at **Ao Pante**, on the northwestern side of the island, where the admission fee (B200) is collected and where the **park headquarters** (☎074 729002–3) is situated. Here you'll find the only shop on the island, selling basic supplies, as well as a visitor centre, a library and a **restaurant**. The **bungalows** (B800–1000/bungalow sleeping four to six people, or B600 for a twin room), which are spread over a large, quiet park behind the beach, are for the main part national park standard issue with cold-water bathrooms, but there are also some basic mattress-on-floor four-person rooms in **longhouses**, sharing bathrooms (B500/room). A few two-person **tents** can be rented for B150 per night; campers with their own gear are charged B30 per person per night. The visitor centre can arrange **transport** by car to several of the island's beaches, as detailed below; transfers to the same places by boat cost at least twice as much, though you may be tempted by a **round-island boat trip** for B2500.

Behind the settlement, the steep, half-hour climb to **To-Boo cliff** is a must, especially at sunset, for the view of the surrounding islands and the crocodile's-head cape at the north end of the bay. A fun ninety-minute boat trip (B400/boat; contact the visitor centre to book) can also be made near Ao Pante, up the canal

△ Ko Tarutao National Marine Park

which leads 2km inland from the pier, through a bird-filled mangrove swamp, to **Crocodile Cave** – where you're unlikely to see any of the big snappers, reported sightings being highly dubious.

A half-hour walk south from Ao Pante brings you to the two quiet bays of **Ao Jak** and **Ao Molae**, fringed by coconut palms and filled with fine white sand; the latter now sports some **bungalows** (from B1000 for an en-suite twin room) and a small restaurant. Transfers by car from Ao Pante to Ao Molae are free if you're staying here, B200/car otherwise. Beyond the next headland lies **Ao Sone** (which gets its name from the casuarina trees that fringe the beach), where a pretty freshwater stream runs past the ranger station at the north end of the bay, and there's a simple restaurant, making this a good place for peaceful camping. Transfers to Ao Sone from Ao Pante cost B400/car, or else it's a two-hour walk. A favourite egg-laying site for sea turtles, the main part of the bay is a three-kilometre sweep of flawless sand, with a one-hour trail leading up to Lu Du Waterfall at the north end, a ninety-minute trail to Lo Po Waterfall in the middle and a mangrove swamp at the far south end.

On the east side of the island, **Ao Taloh Wow** is a rocky bay with a ranger station, restaurant and campsite, connected to Ao Pante by a twelve-kilometre road (B600/car transfer) through old rubber plantations and evergreen forest. If you have a tent, you might want to set off along the overgrown, five-hour trail beyond Taloh Wow, which cuts through the forest to **Ao Taloh Udang**, a sandy bay on the south side where you can set up camp. Here the remnants of a penal colony for political prisoners are just visible: the plotters of two failed coup attempts – including the author of the first English–Thai dictionary and a grandson of Rama VII – were imprisoned here in the 1930s before returning to high government posts. The ordinary convicts, who used to be imprisoned here and at Ao Taloh Wow, had a much harsher time, and during World War II, when supplies from the mainland dried up, prisoners and guards ganged together to turn to piracy. This turned into a lucrative business, which was not suppressed until 1946 when the Thai government asked the British in Malaysia to send in three hundred troops. Pirates and smugglers still occasionally hide out in the Tarutao archipelago, but the main problem now is illegal trawlers fishing in national park waters.

Ko Adang

At **KO ADANG**, a wild, rugged island covered in tropical rainforest, the park station is at **Laem Sone** on the southern shore, where the beach is steep and narrow and backed by a thick canopy of pines. There are **rooms** in bamboo longhouses (B400/room sleeping four), as well as three-person rooms in bungalows (B300) and large **bungalows** sleeping up to nine people (B900–1500). Two-person **tents** can be rented (B150/night), as well as comfortable tents in thatched shelters by the beach (B250/night, supposedly sleeping up to five people); or campers can pitch their own tents for B30 per person per night. There's a **restaurant** here, too.

The half-hour climb to **Sha-do** cliff on the steep slope above Laem Sone gives good views over Ko Lipe to the south. About 2km west along the coast from the park station, the small beach is lined with coconut palms and an abandoned customs house, behind which a twenty-minute trail leads to the small **Pirate Waterfall**. You can rent **longtail boats** (as well as snorkels and masks) through the rangers for excellent snorkelling trips to nearby islands such as Ko Rawi and Ko Jabang (around B800 for up to 10 people, depending on how far you want to go).

Ko Lipe

KO LIPE, 2km south of Adang, makes a busy contrast to the other islands. A small, flat triangle, it's covered in coconut plantations and inhabited by *chao ley*, with shops, a school and a health centre in the village on the eastern side. By rights, such a settlement should not be allowed within the national park boundaries, but the *chao ley* on Lipe are well entrenched: Satun's governor forced the community to move here from Phuket and Ko Lanta between the world wars, to reinforce the island's Thai character and prevent the British rulers of Malaya from laying claim to it. More recently, an influx of mostly European backpackers has been enticed here by the gorgeous beach of Hat Pattaya, the relaxed, anything-goes atmosphere and mellow nightlife. There's a good, regularly updated **website** dedicated to the island, ⓦwww.kohlipethailand.com.

There are fifteen or so **bungalow** outfits on the island, generally not very well designed and mostly operated by enterprising newcomers from the mainland rather than the indigenous *chao ley*. Several of them have set up shop on the eastern side of the island near the village, but the beach here is nowhere near as nice as Hat Pattaya, or even Sunset Beach. Nearly all of the resorts can arrange **snorkelling trips** to the best sites around the islands on the west side of Ko Adang, for around B350/person.

Hat Pattaya

The majority of the resorts can be found on **Hat Pattaya**, the prettiest beach on Ko Lipe, a shining crescent of squeaky-soft white sand, 1km from the village on the south side of the island; on its eastern side, it also has a good offshore reef to explore. Towards the east end of the beach lies *De Zee Huts* (ⓣ085 069 0566; ③), a friendly, easy-going place that offers thatched and yellow-painted bamboo bungalows (at the lower end of this price code) with mosquito nets and en-suite, outdoor toilets. Towards the western end, the cheery and efficiently run *Lee Pae Resort* (ⓣ074 724336 or 074 723804, ⓦwww.leepaeresort.com; ③–⑥) has plenty of shade and dozens of serried bungalows, ranging from en-suite bamboo huts to concrete cottages with air-con and large glass doors facing the beach; also on offer are Internet access and good massages in a sala by the beach. At the far west end of the beach is the Italian-run *Pattaya Song* (ⓣ074 728034, ⓦwww.pattayasongresort.com; ②–⑤), where basic, en-suite bamboo or concrete bungalows are strung out behind the beach or in a lovely location up on a steep promontory with great views of the bay; **sea-kayaks** can be rented here for B500 per day. *Daya Resort* next door (ⓣ074 728030; ②) offers basic concrete rooms or colourful bamboo-and-thatch bungalows, some in a great position right on the beach. Their **restaurant** makes itself very popular with candlelit tables on the beach and excellent grub, notably grilled seafood and southern Thai curries.

About half a dozen **beach bars**, with candlelit tables sprawled on the sand and names like *Time to Chill*, are thinly scattered along Hat Pattaya, while midway along the path that connects the eastern end of the beach to the village is 🏃 *Pooh's*, a well-run and welcoming **bar-restaurant-travel agent** that's a hub of touristic activity on Lipe: on offer are great Thai and Western food, including a choice of breakfasts and coffees, Internet access, currency exchange and **diving** with Lotus (ⓦwww.lotusdive.com). *Pooh's* also has some smart, en-suite concrete **rooms** behind the restaurant (ⓣ074 728020, ⓦwww.poohlipe.com; ③).

Sunset Beach

On the northwest side of Ko Lipe, **Sunset Beach** is not as postcard-perfect as Hat Pattaya, but *Porn* here is probably the most attractive and welcoming resort on the island (ⓣ089 464 5765; ②–③): in a pleasant setting under the trees on the beach are well-kept thatched, bamboo bungalows with verandas and en-suite bathrooms, or there are two-person tents for rent (B100). A path from the back of the resort will bring you to Hat Pattaya, just east of *Daya Resort*, in ten minutes. Attached to *Porn* is Sabye Sports (Ⓣ074 728026, Ⓦwww.sabye-sports.com), Lipe's oldest **dive shop**, which also offers snorkelling trips (B750/person including lunch and gear) and massages. Behind here, under the trees, *Flour Power Bakery* prepares great brownies, apple pie, cookies and iced coffee.

Ko Bulon Lae

The scenery at tiny **KO BULON LAE**, 20km west of Pak Bara, isn't as beautiful as that generally found in Ko Tarutao National Park to the south, but it's not at all bad: a two-kilometre strip of fine white sand runs the length of the casuarina-lined east coast, while *chao ley* fishermen make their ramshackle homes in the tight coves of the rest of the island. A reef of curiously shaped hard coral closely parallels the eastern beach, while **White Rock** to the south of the island has beautifully coloured soft coral and equally dazzling fish. **Snorkelling** gear, as well as **boats** for trips to White Rock, Ko Lao Lieng (see p.495) and other surrounding islands (from around B1200/boat), can be rented at *Pansand* and *Bulon Viewpoint* resorts.

In high season, **ferries** for Ko Bulon Lae currently leave Pak Bara (see p.506) daily at about 10.30am and 3pm (1hr 30min; B250 one way, B400 return); the former continues to Ko Adang and Ko Lipe (3hr; B300 one way). As there's no pier on Bulon Lae, the inter-island boats are met by longtails to transfer visitors to shore (B30). Boats return from Bulon Lae to Pak Bara at around 9am and noon. Services are reduced, sometimes to nothing, during the monsoon season. Contact *Pansand* or First Andaman Travel (see below) for the latest information.

Accommodation

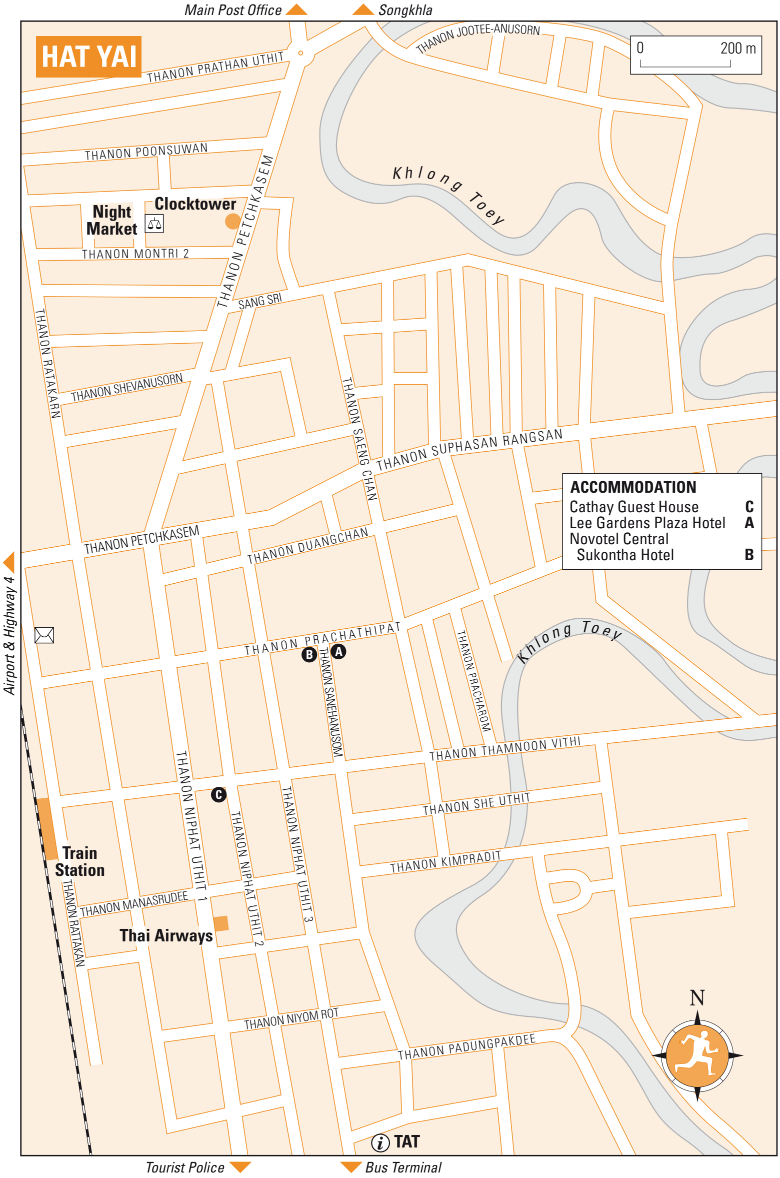
The island's largest and best **resort** is *Pansand* on the east-coast beach (Ⓣ081 397 0802, Ⓦwww.pansand-resort.com; Trang office at First Andaman Travel, 82–84 Thanon Wisetkul Ⓣ075 218035; ⑥–⑦, breakfast included), where large, smart, white clapboard cottages come with verandas, cold-water bathrooms and plenty of room to breathe. On the beach side of the shady, well-tended grounds, there's a sociable restaurant serving up good seafood and other Thai dishes; Internet access is also available. The best of several budget resorts is friendly *Bulone* (Ⓣ081 897 9084; ②–⑤), a huge grassy compound under the casuarinas at the north end of the main beach. Choose between airy, bamboo-walled bungalows (with or without their own bathrooms) and larger, white, en-suite, clapboard affairs, and be sure to eat at the restaurant, which features a small selection of tasty Italian faves. On the north coast about ten minutes' walk from *Pansand*, *Bulon Viewpoint* (Ⓣ074 728005–6, Ⓔbulon_view_satun@hotmail.com; ③–⑤) doesn't quite live up to its name. In a shady garden, which slopes steeply down to a beach bar and restaurant, stand small, simple, en-suite bungalows, as well as large, sturdy, concrete affairs with verandas and chairs.

Hat Yai

Travelling to or through **HAT YAI**, the biggest city in the region, is currently **not recommended** because of the troubles in the south (see p.485). However, as it's a major transport axis, we've provided a few, rudimentary practicalities and a map of the city, in case you get stuck there.

The **TAT office** for Songkhla and Satun provinces is at 1/1 Soi 2, Thanon Niphat Uthit 3 (daily 8.30am–4.30pm; Ⓣ074 243747 or 074 235818, Ⓔtatsgkhl@tat.or.th). The **tourist police** have an office at Thanon Sripoovanart on the south side of town (☎074 246733 or 1155). The three central Niphat Uthit roads are known locally as *sai neung*, *sai sawng* and *sai saam*.

The **train station** is on the west side of the centre at the end of Thanon Thamnoon Vithi; the **bus terminal** is far to the southeast of town on Thanon Kanchanawanit, leaving you with a songthaew ride to the centre, but many buses make a stop at the clocktower on Thanon Petchkasem, on the north side of the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Thanon Ratakarn
Thanon Shevanusorn
Thanon Saeng Chan
Thanon Suphasan Rangsan
ACCOMMODATION
Cathay Guest House C
Lee Gardens Plaza Hotel A
Novotel Central Sukontha Hotel B
Thanon Petchkasem
Thanon Duangchan
Airport & Highway 4
Thanon Prachathipat
B
A
Thanon Sanehanusorn
Thanon Pracharom
Khlong Toey
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Thai Airways
Thanon Niyom Rot
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TAT
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Bus Terminal

centre. The helpful Cathay Tour (Ⓣ074 235044), a **travel agency** on the ground floor of the guest house of the same name, handles onward flight, bus and air-con minibus tickets.

Accommodation

Cathay Guest House 93 Thanon Niphat Uthit 2 Ⓣ074 243815, Ⓔcathay_ontours@hotmail.com. This friendly place in the heart of town has long been Hat Yai's main travellers' hub; the café acts as a sociable meeting-place, and the rooms have en-suite bathrooms. ②

Lee Gardens Plaza Hotel 29 Thanon Prachatipat Ⓣ074 261111, Ⓦwww.leeplaza.com. Characterless but good-value and central upmarket option with great views of the city from its 400 comfortable rooms. Facilities include a fitness centre, a rooftop pool and a 33rd-floor panoramic restaurant. ⑥

Novotel Central Sukhontha Hotel 3 Thanon Sanehanusom Ⓣ074 352222, Ⓦwww.centralhotelsresorts.com. Luxury hotel in a handy central location next to the Central Department Store, with fitness centre, sauna and swimming pool. Offers great views over the city from its four top-notch restaurants. ⑧

Travel details

Trains

Phatthalung to: Bangkok (5 daily; 12–15hr).
Trang to: Bangkok (2 daily; 15–16hr).

Buses

Satun to: Bangkok (2 daily; 16hr); Phuket (2–3 daily; 7hr); Trang (every 30min; 3hr).

Trang to: Bangkok (6 daily; 12–14hr); Krabi (hourly; 2hr); Nakhon Si Thammarat (3 daily; 2–3hr); Phatthalung (hourly; 1hr 30min); Phuket (hourly; 5hr); Satun (every 30min; 3hr).

Flights

Trang to: Bangkok (1–2 daily; 1hr 30min).

Contexts

Contexts

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History

Thailand's history is complex and fascinating, but what follows can be only a brief account of the major events in the country's past. For more detailed coverage, get hold of a copy of David Wyatt's excellent Thailand: A Short History (see p.536).

Early history

The region's first distinctive civilization, **Dvaravati**, was established around two thousand years ago by an Austroasiatic-speaking people known as the Mon. One of its mainstays was Theravada Buddhism, which had been introduced to Thailand during the second or third century BC by Indian missionaries. In the eighth century, peninsular Thailand to the south of Dvaravati came under the control of the **Srivijaya** empire, a Mahayana Buddhist state centred on Sumatra, which had strong ties with India.

From the ninth century onwards, both Dvaravati and Srivijaya Thailand succumbed to invading Khmers from Cambodia, who took control of northeastern, central and peninsular Thailand. They ruled from Angkor and left dozens of spectacular temple complexes throughout the region. By the thirteenth century, however, the Khmers had overreached themselves and were in no position to resist the onslaught of a vibrant new force in Southeast Asia, the Thais.

The earliest traceable history of the Thai people picks them up in southern China around the fifth century AD, when they were squeezed by Chinese and Vietnamese expansionism into sparsely inhabited northeastern Laos. Their first significant entry into what is now Thailand seems to have happened in the north, where, some time after the seventh century, the Thais formed a state known as Yonok. Theravada Buddhism spread to Yonok via Dvaravati around the end of the tenth century, which served not only to unify the Thais themselves, but also to link them to the wider community of Buddhists.

By the end of the twelfth century, they formed the majority of the population in Thailand, then under the control of the Khmer empire. The Khmers' main outpost, at Lopburi, was by this time regarded as the administrative capital of a land called "Syam".

Sukhothai and Ayutthaya

Some time around 1238, Thais in the upper Chao Phraya valley captured the main Khmer outpost in the region at **Sukhothai** and established a kingdom there. When the young Ramkhamhaeng came to the throne around 1278, he seized control of much of the Chao Phraya valley, and over the next twenty years gained the submission of most of Thailand under a complex tribute system.

Although the empire of Sukhothai extended Thai control over a vast area, its greatest contribution to the Thais' development was at home, in cultural and political matters. A famous inscription by Ramkhamhaeng, now housed in the Bangkok National Museum, describes a prosperous era of benevolent rule, and it is generally agreed that Ramkhamhaeng ruled justly according to Theravada Buddhist doctrine. A further sign of the Thais' growing self-confidence was the invention of a new script to make their tonal language understood by the non-Thai inhabitants of the land.

After the death of Ramkhamhaeng around 1299, however, his empire fell apart, and **Ayutthaya** became the capital of the Thai empire. Soon after founding the city in 1351, the ambitious King Ramathibodi united the principalities of the lower Chao Phraya valley, which had formed the western provinces of the Khmer empire. When he recruited his bureaucracy from the urban elite of Lopburi, Ramathibodi set the style of government at Ayutthaya, elements of which persist to the present day. The elaborate etiquette, language and rituals of Angkor were adopted, and, most importantly, so was the concept of the ruler as *devaraja* (divine king).

The site chosen by Ramathibodi for an international port was the best in the region, and so began Ayutthaya's rise to prosperity, based on exploiting the upswing in trade in the middle of the fourteenth century along the routes between India and China. By 1540, the Kingdom of Ayutthaya had grown to cover most of the area of modern-day Thailand. Despite a 1568 invasion by the Burmese, which led to twenty years of foreign rule, Ayutthaya made a spectacular comeback, and in the seventeenth century its foreign trade boomed. In 1511, the Portuguese had become the first Western power to trade with Ayutthaya, while a treaty with Spain in 1598 was followed by similar agreements with Holland and England in 1608 and 1612 respectively. European merchants flocked to Thailand, not only to buy Thai products, but also for the Chinese and Japanese goods on sale there.

In the mid-eighteenth century, however, the rumbling in the Burmese jungle to the north began to make itself heard again. After an unsuccessful siege in 1760, February 1766 saw the **Burmese** descend upon the city for the last time. The Thais held out for over a year but, finally, in April 1767, the city was taken. The Burmese savagely razed everything to the ground, led off tens of thousands of prisoners to Burma and abandoned the city to the jungle.

From Taksin to Rama III

Out of this lawless mess emerged **Phraya Taksin**, a charismatic general, who was crowned king in December 1768 at his new capital of **Thonburi**, on the opposite bank of the river from modern-day Bangkok. Within two years, he had restored all of Ayutthaya's territories and, by the end of the next decade, had brought Cambodia and much of Laos into a huge new empire.

However, by 1779 all was not well with the king. Taksin was becoming increasingly irrational and sadistic, and in March 1782 he was ousted in a coup. Chao Phraya Chakri, Taksin's military commander, was invited to take power and had Taksin executed.

With the support of the Ayutthayan aristocracy, Chakri – reigning as **Rama I** (1782–1809) – set about consolidating the Thai kingdom. His first act was to move the capital across the river to what we know as Bangkok, on the more defensible east bank. Borrowing from the layout of Ayutthaya, he built a new royal palace and impressive monasteries in the area of Ratanakosin within a defensive ring of two (later expanded to three) canals. In the palace temple, Wat Phra Kaeo, he enshrined the talismanic Emerald Buddha, which he had snatched during his campaigns in Laos. Trade with China revived, and the style of government was put on a more modern footing: while retaining many of the features of a *devaraja*, he shared more responsibility with his courtiers, as a first among equals.

The peaceful accession of Rama I's son as **Rama II** (1809–24) signalled the establishment of the Chakri dynasty, which is still in place today. This Second Reign is best remembered as a fertile period for Thai literature; indeed, Rama II himself is renowned as one of the great Thai poets.

By the reign of **Rama III** (1824–51), the Thais were starting to get alarmed by British colonialism in the region. In 1826, Rama III was obliged to sign the

Burney Treaty, a limited trade agreement with the British, by which the Thais won some political security in return for reducing their taxes on goods passing through Bangkok.

Mongkut and Chulalongkorn

Rama IV, more commonly known as **Mongkut** (1851–68), had been a Buddhist monk for 27 years when he succeeded his brother. But far from leading a cloistered life, Mongkut had travelled widely throughout Thailand, and had taken an interest in Western learning, studying English, Latin and the sciences.

Realizing that Thailand would be unable to resist the military might of the British, the king reduced import and export taxes, allowed British subjects to live and own land in Thailand and granted them freedom of trade under the Bowring Treaty. Within a decade, similar agreements had been signed with France, the United States and a score of other nations. Thus, by skilful diplomacy the king avoided a close relationship with just one power, which could easily have led to Thailand's annexation.

Mongkut's son, **Chulalongkorn**, took the throne as Rama V (1868–1910) at the age of only fifteen, but was well prepared by an excellent education which mixed traditional Thai and modern Western elements – provided by Mrs Anna Leonowens, subject of *The King and I*. One of his first acts was to scrap the custom by which subjects were required to prostrate themselves in the presence of the king. In the 1880s, he began to restructure the government to meet the country's needs, setting up a host of departments – for education, public health, the army and the like – and bringing in scores of foreign advisors to help with everything from foreign affairs to rail lines.

Throughout this period, however, the Western powers maintained their pressure on the region. The most serious threat to Thai sovereignty was the Franco–Siamese Crisis of 1893, which culminated in the French sending gunboats up the Chao Phraya River to Bangkok. Flouting numerous international laws, France claimed control over Laos and made other outrageous demands, which Chulalongkorn had no option but to agree to. During the course of his reign, the country was obliged to cede almost half of its territory, and forewent huge sums of tax revenue in order to preserve its independence; but by Chulalongkorn's death in 1910, the frontiers were fixed as they are today.

The end of absolute monarchy and World War II

Chulalongkorn was succeeded by a flamboyant, British-educated prince, **Vajiravudh** (Rama VI, 1910–25) and by the time the young and inexperienced **Prajadhipok** – 76th child of Chulalongkorn – was catapulted to the throne as Rama VII (1925–35), Vajiravudh's extravagance had created severe financial problems, which were exacerbated by the onset of the Great Depression.

On June 24, 1932, a small group of middle-ranking officials, dissatisfied with the injustices of monarchical government and led by a lawyer, Pridi Phanomyong, and an army major, Luang Phibunsongkhram (Phibun), staged a coup with only a handful of troops. Prajadhipok weakly submitted to the conspirators, and a hundred and fifty years of **absolute monarchy** in Bangkok came to a sudden end. The king was sidelined to a position of symbolic significance, and in 1935 he abdicated in favour of his ten-year-old nephew, Ananda, then a schoolboy living in Switzerland.

Phibun emerged as prime minister after the decisive elections of 1938, and a year later officially renamed the country Thailand ("Land of the Free") – Siam, it was argued, was a name bestowed by external forces, and the new title made it clear that the country belonged to the Thais rather than the economically dominant Chinese.

The Thais were dragged into **World War II** on December 8, 1941, when, almost at the same time as the assault on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese invaded the east coast of peninsular Thailand, with their sights set on Singapore to the south. The Thais at first resisted fiercely, but realizing that the position was hopeless, Phibun quickly ordered a ceasefire.

The Thai government concluded a military alliance with Japan and declared war against the United States and Great Britain in January 1942, probably in the belief that the Japanese would win. However, the Thai minister in Washington, Seni Pramoj, refused to deliver the declaration of war against the US, and, in cooperation with the Americans, began organizing a resistance movement called Seri Thai. Pridi Phanomyong, now acting as regent to the young king, secretly coordinated the movement, smuggling in American agents and housing them in Bangkok. By 1944, Japan's defeat looked likely, and in July, Phibun, who had been most closely associated with them, was forced to resign by the National Assembly.

Postwar upheavals

With the fading of the military, the election of January 1946 was for the first time contested by organized political parties, resulting in Pridi becoming prime minister. A new constitution was drafted, and the outlook for democratic, civilian government seemed bright. Hopes were shattered, however, on June 9, 1946, when King Ananda was found dead in his bed, with a bullet wound in his forehead. Three palace servants were hurriedly tried and executed, but the murder has never been satisfactorily explained. Pridi resigned as prime minister, and in April 1948, Phibun, playing on the threat of communism, took over the premiership again.

As **communism** developed its hold in the region with the takeover of China in 1949 and the French defeat in Indochina in 1954, the US increasingly viewed Thailand as a bulwark against the red menace. Between 1951 and 1957, when its annual state budget was only about $200 million a year, Thailand received a total of $149 million in American economic aid and $222 million in military aid.

Phibun narrowly won a general election in 1957, but only by blatant vote-rigging and coercion. After vehement public outcry, General Sarit, the commander-in-chief of the army, overthrew the new government in September the same year. Believing that Thailand would prosper best under a unifying authority, Sarit set about re-establishing the monarchy as the head of the social hierarchy and the source of legitimacy for the government. Ananda's successor, **Bhumibol** (Rama IX), was pushed into an active role, while Sarit ruthlessly silenced critics and pressed ahead with a plan for economic development.

The Vietnam War and the democracy movement

Sarit died in 1963, whereupon the military succession passed to General Thanom. His most pressing problem was the **Vietnam War**. The Thais, with the backing of the US, quietly began to conduct military operations in Laos, to which North Vietnam and China responded by supporting anti-government insurgency in Thailand. By 1968, around 45,000 US military personnel were on Thai soil, which became the base for US bombing raids against North Vietnam and Laos. The effects of the American presence were profound. The economy swelled with dollars, and hundreds of thousands of Thais became reliant on the Americans for a living, with a consequent proliferation of prostitution – centred on Bangkok's infamous Patpong district – and corruption. Moreover, the sudden exposure to Western culture led many to question traditional Thai values and the political status quo.

Poor farmers in particular were becoming increasingly disillusioned with their lot, and many turned against the Bangkok government. At the end of 1964, the Communist Party of Thailand and other groups formed a broad left coalition which soon had the support of several thousand insurgents in remote areas of the northeast and the north. By 1967, a separate threat had arisen in southern Thailand, involving Muslim dissidents and the Chinese-dominated Communist Party of Malaysia.

Thanom was now facing a major security crisis, and in November 1971 he imposed repressive **military rule**. In response, **student demonstrations** began in June 1973, and in October as many as 500,000 people turned out at Thammasat University in Bangkok to demand a new constitution. Clashes with the police ensued on October 14, during which over 350 people were reported killed, but elements in the army, backed by King Bhumibol, refused to provide enough troops to crush the uprising. Later that day, Thanom was forced to resign and leave the country.

In a new climate of openness, **Kukrit Pramoj** formed a coalition of seventeen elected parties and secured a promise of US withdrawal from Thailand, but his government was riven with feuding. In October 1976, the students demonstrated again, protesting against the return of Thanom to Bangkok. This time there was no restraint: supported by elements of the military and the government, the police and reactionary students launched a massive assault on Thammasat University. On October 6, hundreds of students were brutally beaten, scores were lynched and some even burnt alive; the military took control and suspended the constitution.

“Premocracy”

Soon after, the military-appointed prime minister, Thanin Kraivichien, forced dissidents to undergo anti-communist indoctrination, but his measures seem to have been too repressive even for the military, who forced him to resign in October 1977. General Kriangsak Chomanand took over, and began to break up the insurgency with shrewd offers of amnesty. He in turn was displaced in February 1980 by **General Prem Tinsulanonda**, backed by a broad parliamentary coalition.

Untainted by corruption, Prem achieved widespread support, including that of the monarchy. Overseeing a period of rapid economic growth, Prem maintained the premiership until 1988, with a unique mixture of dictatorship and democracy sometimes called **Premocracy**: although never standing for parliament himself, Prem was asked by the legislature after every election to become prime minister. He eventually stepped down because, he said, it was time for the country’s leader to be chosen from among its elected representatives.

The 1992 demonstrations

The new prime minister was indeed an elected MP, Chatichai Choonhavan. He pursued a vigorous policy of economic development, but this fostered widespread corruption. Following an economic downturn and Chatichai’s attempts to downgrade the political role of the military, the armed forces staged a bloodless coup on February 23, 1991, led by Supreme Commander Sunthorn and General Suchinda, the army commander-in-chief, who became premier.

When Suchinda reneged on promises to make democratic amendments to the constitution, hundreds of thousands of ordinary Thais poured onto the streets around Bangkok's Democracy Monument in **mass demonstrations** between May 17 and 20, 1992. Suchinda brutally crushed the protests, leaving hundreds dead or injured, but was then forced to resign when King Bhumibol expressed his disapproval in a ticking-off that was broadcast on world television.

The 1997 constitution

The elections on September 13, 1992 were won by the Democrat Party, led by **Chuan Leekpai**, a noted upholder of democracy and the rule of law. Despite many successes through a period of continued economic growth, he lost the 1995 poll to Chart Thai and its leader, Banharn Silpa-archa, who was nicknamed "the walking ATM" by the press for his vote-buying reputation. In the following year he in turn was replaced by **General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh**, leader of the New Aspiration Party (NAP), who just won what was dubbed as the most corrupt election in Thai history, with an estimated 25 million baht spent on vote-buying in rural areas.

The most significant positive event of his tenure was the approval of a **new constitution**. Drawn up by an independent drafting assembly, its main points included: direct elections to the senate, rather than appointment of senators by the prime minister; acceptance of the right of assembly as the basis of a democratic society and guarantees of individual rights and freedoms; greater public accountability; and increased popular participation in local administration. The eventual aim of the new charter was to end the traditional system of patronage, vested interests and vote-buying.

The economic crisis

At the start of Chavalit's premiership, the Thai **economy** was already on shaky ground. In February 1997, foreign-exchange dealers began to mount speculative attacks on the baht, alarmed at the size of Thailand's private foreign debt – 250 billion baht in the unproductive property sector alone, much of it accrued through the proliferation of prestigious skyscrapers in Bangkok. The government valiantly

△ King Bhumibol (Rama IX).

defended the pegged exchange rate, spending $23 billion of the country's formerly healthy foreign-exchange reserves, but at the beginning of July was forced to give up the ghost – the baht was floated and soon went into free-fall.

Blaming its traditional allies, the Americans, for neglecting their obligations, Thailand sought help from Japan; Tokyo suggested the **IMF**, who in August 1997 put together a **rescue package** for Thailand of $17 billion. Among the conditions of the package, the Thai government was to slash the national budget, control inflation and open up financial institutions to foreign ownership.

Chavalit's performance in the face of the crisis was viewed as inept, and in November, he was succeeded by Chuan Leekpai, who took up what was widely seen as a poisoned chalice for his second term. Chuan immediately took a hard line to try to restore confidence: he followed the IMF's advice, which involved maintaining cripplingly high interest rates to protect the baht, and pledged to reform the financial system. Although this played well abroad, at home the government encountered increasing hostility. Unemployment had doubled to 2 million by mid-1998 and there were frequent public protests against the IMF.

By the end of 1998, however, Chuan's tough stance was paying off, with the baht stabilizing at just under 40 to the US dollar, and interest rates and inflation starting to fall. Foreign investors slowly began returning to Thailand, and by October 1999 Chuan was confident enough to announce that he was forgoing almost $4 billion of the IMF's planned rescue package.

Thaksin

The 2001 general election was won by a new party, **Thai Rak Thai** (Thai Loves Thai), led by one of Thailand's wealthiest men, **Thaksin Shinawatra**, an ex-policeman who had made a personal fortune from government telecommunications concessions. Instead of a move towards greater democracy, as envisioned by the new constitution, Thaksin's government seemed to represent a full-blown merger between politics and big business, concentrating economic power in even fewer hands. Furthermore, the prime minister began to apply commercial and legal pressure, including several lawsuits, to try to silence critics in the media and parliament, and to manipulate the Senate and supposedly independent institutions such as the Election Commission to consolidate his own power. As his standing became more firmly entrenched, he rejected constitutional reforms designed to rein in his power – famously declaring that "democracy is only a tool" for achieving other goals. Thaksin did, however, live up to his billing as a populist reformer. In his first year of government, he issued a three-year loan moratorium for perennially indebted farmers and set up a one-million-baht development fund for each of the country's seventy thousand villages. To improve public health access, a standard charge of B30 per hospital visit was introduced nationwide.

In early 2004, politically and criminally motivated violence in the **Islamic southern provinces** escalated sharply, and since then, there have been over 1200 deaths on both sides in the troubles. The insurgents have targeted any representative of central authority, including monks and teachers, as well as setting off bombs in marketplaces and near tourist hotels. The authorities have inflamed opinion in the south by reacting violently, notably in crushing protests at Tak Bai and the much-revered Krue Se Mosque in Pattani in 2004, in which a total of over two hundred alleged insurgents died. In 2005, the government imposed **martial law** in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces and in parts of Songkhla province – this, however, has exacerbated economic and unemployment problems in what is Thailand's poorest region. Facing a variety of shadowy groups, whose precise aims are unclear, the authorities' natural instinct has been to get tough – which so far has brought the problem no nearer to a solution. Recent, constructive proposals by the **National Reconciliation Commission**, however, headed by former prime minister, Anand Panyarachun, may, if adopted, hold out some cause for hope.

Despite these problems, but bolstered by his high-profile response to the tsunami on December 26, 2004, in which over eight thousand people died on Thailand's Andaman Coast (see p.380), Thaksin breezed through the **February 2005 election**, becoming the first prime minister in Thai history to win an outright majority at the polls. He promised an end to poverty, ambitious infrastructure projects and privatization of state companies, but the prospect of a one-party state alarmed a wide spectrum of opposition. When Thaksin's relatives sold their shares in the family's Shin Corporation in January 2006 for £1.1 billion, without paying tax, the tipping point was reached: tens of thousands of mostly middle-class Thais flocked to Bangkok to take part in peaceful demonstrations, which went on for weeks on end, under the umbrella of the **People's Alliance for Democracy**. The prime minister was eventually obliged to call a snap general election for April 2, but the three main opposition parties decided to boycott the poll, claiming that Thaksin was unfairly seeking a mandate without having to answer the corruption claims against him. Unsurprisingly, Thai Rak Thai won the election, but three days later, after an audience with King Bhumibol, Thaksin resigned in favour of his deputy, Chitchai Wannasathit. In May, the Constitutional Court ruled that the election had been unconstitutional and ordered a new poll. Thaksin was reinstalled as caretaker prime minister, but on September 19, while away at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, he was ousted by a military **coup d'état**, led by the army commander, General Sondhi Boonyaratkalin. At the time of going to press, it seems to have been a remarkably benign putsch, with the apparent support of the king and a large number of Thais. An interim caretaker prime-minister, the senior royal advisor and former army general Surayud Chulanont, was inducted within a fortnight of the takeover, with General Sondhi promising that reform of the constitution and a general election would follow within the coming year.

Religion: Thai Buddhism

Over ninety percent of Thais consider themselves Theravada Buddhists, followers of the teachings of a holy man usually referred to as the Buddha (Enlightened One), though more precisely known as Gautama Buddha to distinguish him from three lesser-known Buddhas who preceded him, and from the fifth and final Buddha who is predicted to arrive in the year 4457 AD. Theravada Buddhism is one of the two main schools of Buddhism practised in Asia, and in Thailand it has absorbed an eclectic assortment of animist and Hindu elements into its beliefs as well.

The other ten percent of Thailand's population comprises Mahayana Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Christians. Islam is the dominant religion in far southern Thailand.

The Buddha: his life and beliefs

Buddhists believe that Gautama Buddha was the five-hundredth incarnation of a single being: the stories of these five hundred lives, collectively known as the **Jataka**, provide the inspiration for much Thai art. (Hindus also accept Gautama Buddha into their pantheon, perceiving him as the ninth manifestation of their god Vishnu.)

In his last incarnation he was born in Nepal as **Prince Gautama Siddhartha** in either the sixth or seventh century BC, the son of a king and his hitherto barren wife, who finally became pregnant only after having a dream that a white elephant had entered her womb. At the time of his birth astrologers predicted that Gautama was to become universally respected, either as a worldly king or as a spiritual saviour, depending on which way of life he pursued. Much preferring the former idea, the prince's father forbade anyone to let the boy out of the palace grounds, and took it upon himself to educate Gautama in all aspects of the high life. Most statues of the Buddha depict him with elongated earlobes, which is a reference to this early pampered existence, when he would have worn heavy precious stones in his ears.

The prince married and became a father, but at the age of 29 he flouted his father's authority and sneaked out into the world beyond the palace. On this fateful trip he encountered successively an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a hermit, and thus for the first time was made aware that pain and suffering were intrinsic to human life. Contemplation seemed the only means of discovering why this should be so – and therefore Gautama decided to leave the palace and become a **Hindu ascetic**.

For six or seven years he wandered the countryside leading a life of self-denial and self-mortification, but failed to come any closer to the answer. Eventually concluding that the best course of action must be to follow a "Middle Way" – neither indulgent nor over-ascetic – Gautama sat down beneath the famous riverside bodhi tree at **Bodh Gaya** in India, facing the rising sun, to meditate until he achieved enlightenment. For 49 days he sat cross-legged in the "lotus position", contemplating the causes of suffering and wrestling with temptations that materialized to distract him. Most of these were sent by **Mara**, the Evil One, who was finally subdued when Gautama summoned the earth goddess **Mae Toranee** by pointing the fingers of his right hand at the ground – the gesture known as *Bhumisparsa Mudra*, which has been immortalized by hundreds of Thai sculptors. Mae Toranee wrung torrents of water from her hair and engulfed Mara's demonic emissaries in a flood, an episode that also features in several sculptures and paintings, most famously in the statue in Bangkok's Sanam Luang.

Temptations dealt with, Gautama soon came to attain **enlightenment** and so become a Buddha. As the place of his enlightenment, the **bodhi tree** (or bo tree) has assumed special significance for Buddhists: not only does it appear in many Buddhist paintings and a few sculptures, but there's often a real bodhi tree (*ficus religiosa*) planted in temple compounds as well. Furthermore, the bot is nearly always built facing either a body of water or facing east (preferably both).

The Buddha preached his **first sermon** in a deer park in India, where he characterized his Dharma (doctrine) as a wheel. From this episode comes the early Buddhist symbol the **Dharmachakra**, known as the Wheel of Law, Wheel of Doctrine or Wheel of Life, which is often accompanied by a statue of a deer. Thais celebrate this first sermon and many other important events in the Buddha's life with public holidays and festivals, see Basics, p.55.

For the next forty-odd years the Buddha travelled the region converting non-believers and performing miracles. He also went back to his father's palace where he was temporarily reunited with his wife and child.

The Buddha "died" at the age of eighty on the banks of a river at Kusinari in India – an event often dated to 543 BC, which is why the Thai calendar is 543 years out of synch with the Western one, so that the year 2007 AD becomes 2550 BE (Buddhist Era). Lying on his side, propping up his head on his hand, the Buddha passed into **Nirvana** (giving rise to another classic pose, the Reclining Buddha), the unimaginable state of nothingness which knows no suffering and from which there is no reincarnation.

Buddhist doctrine

After the Buddha entered Nirvana, his **doctrine** spread relatively quickly across India, and probably was first promulgated in Thailand in about the third century BC. His teachings, the *Tripitaka*, were written down in the Pali language – a derivative of Sanskrit – in a form that became known as Theravada, or "The Doctrine of the Elders".

As taught by the Buddha, **Theravada Buddhism** built on the Hindu theory of perpetual reincarnation in the pursuit of perfection, introducing the notion of life as a cycle of suffering which could only be transcended by enlightened beings able to free themselves from earthly ties and enter into the blissful state of Nirvana. For the well-behaved but unenlightened Buddhist, each reincarnation marks a move up a vague kind of ladder, with animals at the bottom, women figuring lower down than men, and monks coming at the top.

The Buddhist has no hope of enlightenment without acceptance of the **four noble truths**. In encapsulated form, these hold that desire is the root cause of all suffering and can be extinguished only by following the eightfold path or Middle Way. This **Middle Way** is essentially a highly moral mode of life that includes all the usual virtues like compassion, respect and moderation, and eschews vices such as self-indulgence and antisocial behaviour. But the key to it all is an acknowledgement that the physical world is impermanent and ever-changing, and that all things – including the self – are therefore not worth craving. Only by pursuing a condition of complete **detachment** can human beings transcend earthly suffering.

By the beginning of the first millennium, a new movement called **Mahayana** (Great Vehicle) had emerged within the Theravada school, attempting to make Buddhism more accessible by introducing a Hindu-style pantheon of *bodhisattva*, or Buddhist saints, who, although they had achieved enlightenment, nevertheless postponed entering Nirvana in order to inspire the populace. Mahayana Buddhism subsequently spread north into China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan, also entering southern Thailand via the Srivijayan empire around the eighth century and parts of Khmer Cambodia in about the eleventh century. Meanwhile Theravada Buddhism (which the Mahayanists disparagingly renamed “Hinayana” or “Lesser Vehicle”) established itself most significantly in Sri Lanka, northern and central Thailand and Burma.

The monkhood

In Thailand it’s the duty of the 270,000-strong **Sangha** (monkhood) to set an example to the Theravada Buddhist community by living a life as close to the Middle Way as possible and by preaching the Dharma to the people. A monk’s life is governed by 227 strict precepts that include celibacy and the rejection of all personal possessions except gifts.

Each day begins with an alms round in the neighbourhood so that the laity can donate food and thereby gain themselves merit (see p.526), and then is chiefly spent in meditation, chanting, teaching and study. Always the most respected members of any community, monks act as teachers, counsellors and arbiters in local disputes, and sometimes become spokesmen for villagers’ rights. They also perform rituals at cremations, weddings and other events, such as the launching of a new business or even the purchase of a new car. Although some Thai women do become nuns, they belong to no official order and aren’t respected as much as the monks. Many young boys from poor families find themselves almost obliged to become **novice monks** because that’s the only way they can get accommodation, food and, crucially, an education. This is provided free in exchange for duties around the wat, and novices are required to adhere to ten rather than 227 Buddhist precepts.

Monkhood doesn’t have to be for life: a man may leave the Sangha three times without stigma and in fact every Thai male (including royalty) is expected to **enter the monkhood** for a short period at some point in his life, ideally between leaving school and marrying, as a rite of passage into adulthood. So ingrained into the social system is this practice that Thai government departments and some private companies grant their employees paid leave for their time as a monk, but the custom is in decline as young men increasingly have to consider the effect their absence may have on their career prospects. Instead, many men now enter the monkhood for a brief period after the death of a parent, to make merit both for the deceased and for the rest of the family. The most popular time for temporary ordination is the three-month Buddhist retreat period – **Pansa**, sometimes referred to as “Buddhist Lent” – which begins in July and lasts for the duration of the rainy season. (The monks’ confinement is said to originate from the earliest years of Buddhist history, when farmers complained that perambulating monks were squashing their sprouting rice crops.) **Ordination ceremonies** take place in almost every wat at this time and make spectacular scenes, with the shaven-headed novice usually clad entirely in white and carried about on friends’ or relatives’ shoulders, or even on **elephants**. The boys’ parents donate money, food and necessities such as washing powder and mosquito repellent, processing around the temple compound with their gifts, often joined by dancers or travelling players hired for the occasion.

Monks in contemporary society

In recent years, some monks have extended their role as village spokesmen to become influential activists: a growing number of temples have established themselves as successful drug rehabilitation centres, for example, while others have become known as wildlife sanctuaries. Other monks have acquired such a reputation for giving wise counsel and bringing good fortune and prosperity to their followers that they have become national gurus and their temples generate great wealth through the production of specially blessed amulets (see p.138) and photographs.

Though the increasing involvement of many monks in the secular world has not met with unanimous approval, far more disappointing to the laity are those monks who **flout the precepts** of the Sangha by succumbing to the temptations of a consumer society, flaunting Raybans, Rolexes and Mercedes (in some cases actually bought with temple funds), chain-smoking and flirting, even making pocket money from predicting lottery results and practising faith-healing. With so much national pride and integrity riding on the sanctity of the Sangha, any whiff of a deeper scandal is bound to strike deep into the national psyche, and everyone was shocked when a young monk confessed to robbing and then murdering a British tourist in 1995. Since then Thai monks have been involved in an unprecedented litany of crimes, including several rapes and murders, and there's been an embarrassment of exposés of corrupt, high-ranking abbots caught carousing in disreputable bars, drug-dealing and even gun-running. This has prompted a stream of editorials on the state of the Sangha and the collapse of spiritual values at the heart of Thai society. The inclusivity of the monkhood – which is open to just about any male who wants to join – has been highlighted as a particularly vulnerable aspect, not least because donning saffron robes has always been an accepted way for criminals, reformed or otherwise, to repent of their past deeds.

Interestingly, back in the late 1980s, the influential monk Phra Bodhirak was unceremoniously defrocked after criticizing what he saw as a tide of decadence infecting Thai Buddhism and advocating an all-round purification of the Sangha. He now preaches from his breakaway **Santi Asoke** sect headquarters on the outskirts of Bangkok, but though his ascetic code of anti-materialist behaviour is followed by thousands of devotees across Thailand, it is not sanctioned by the more worldly figures of the Sangha Supreme Council. Nonetheless, Santi Asoke is often vocal on political issues: sect members were active in the democracy movement of 1992 and participated in the 2006 anti-Thaksin demonstrations as the self-fashioned Dharma Army. The sect is also famous across the country for its cheap vegetarian restaurants and for the back-to-basics uniform of the traditional blue farmer's shirt worn by many of its members.

Buddhist practice

A devout Buddhist layperson is expected to adhere to the **five basic precepts**, namely not to kill or steal, to refrain from sexual misconduct and incorrect speech (lies, gossip and abuse) and to eschew intoxicating liquor and drugs. There are three extra precepts for special *wan phra* holy days and for those laypeople including foreign students who study meditation at Thai temples: no eating after noon, no entertainment (including TV and music) and no sleeping on a soft bed; in addition, the no sexual misconduct precept turns into no sex at all.

In practice most Thai Buddhists aim only to be **reborn** higher up the incarnation scale rather than set their sights on the ultimate goal of Nirvana. The rank of the reincarnation is directly related to the good and bad actions performed in the previous life, which accumulate to determine one's **karma** or destiny – hence the Thai obsession with "making merit".

Merit-making (*tham bun*) can be done in all sorts of ways, from giving a monk his breakfast to attending a Buddhist service or donating money to the neighbourhood temple, and most festivals are essentially communal merit-making opportunities. Between the big festivals, the most common days for making merit and visiting the temple are *wan phra* (holy days), which are determined by the phase of the moon and occur four times a month. For a Thai man, temporary ordination is a

△ Making merit

very important way of accruing merit not only for himself but also for his mother and sisters – wealthier citizens might take things a step further by commissioning the casting of a Buddha statue or even paying for the building of a wat. One of the more bizarre but common merit-making activities involves **releasing caged birds**: worshippers buy one or more tiny finches from vendors at wat compounds and, by liberating them from their cage, prove their Buddhist compassion towards all living things. The fact that the birds were free until netted earlier that morning doesn't seem to detract from the ritual at all. In riverside and seaside wats, birds are sometimes replaced by fish or even baby turtles.

For a detailed introduction to Thai Buddhism, see Ⓦwww.thaibuddhism.net. Details of Thai temples that welcome foreign students of Buddhism and meditation are on p.64.

Spirits and non-Buddhist deities

The complicated history of the area now known as Thailand has, not surprisingly, made Thai Buddhism a strangely syncretic faith, as you'll realize when you enter a Buddhist temple compound to be confronted by a statue of a Hindu deity. While regular Buddhist merit-making insures a Thai for the next life, there are certain **Hindu gods and animist spirits** that most Thais also cultivate for help with more immediate problems. Sophisticated Bangkokians and illiterate farmers alike find no inconsistency in these apparently incompatible practices, and as often as not it's a Buddhist monk who is called in to exorcize a malevolent spirit. Even the Buddhist King Bhumibol employs Brahmin priests and astrologers to determine auspicious days and officiate at certain royal ceremonies and, like his royal predecessors of the Chakri dynasty, he also associates himself with the Hindu god Vishnu by assuming the title Rama IX – Rama, hero of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, having been Vishnu's seventh manifestation on earth.

If a Thai wants help in achieving a short-term goal, like passing an exam, becoming pregnant or winning the lottery, then he or she will quite likely turn to the **Hindu pantheon**, visiting an enshrined statue of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva or Ganesh, and making offerings of flowers, incense and maybe food. If the outcome is favourable, devotees will probably come back to show thanks, bringing more offerings and maybe even hiring a dance troupe to perform a celebratory *lakhon chatri* as well. Built in honour of Brahma, Bangkok's Erawan Shrine is the most famous place of Hindu-inspired worship in the country.

Whereas Hindu deities tend to be benevolent, **spirits** (or *phi*) are not nearly as reliable and need to be mollified more frequently. They come in hundreds of varieties, some more malign than others, and inhabit everything from trees, rivers and caves to public buildings and private homes – even taking over people if they feel like it. So that these *phi* don't pester human inhabitants, each building has a special **spirit house** (*saan phra phum*) in its vicinity, as a dwelling for spirits ousted by the building's construction. Usually raised on a short column to set it at or above eye-level, the spirit house must occupy an auspicious location – not, for example, in the shadow of the main building – so help from the local temple is usually required when deciding on the best position. Spirit houses are generally about the size of a dolls' house and designed to look like a wat or a traditional Thai house, but their ornamentation is supposed to reflect the status of the humans' building, so if that building is enlarged or refurbished, the spirit house should be improved accordingly. Little figurines representing the relevant guardian spirit and his aides are sometimes put inside the little house, and daily offerings of incense, lighted candles and garlands of jasmine are placed alongside them to keep the *phi* happy – a disgruntled spirit is a dangerous spirit, liable to cause sickness, accidents and even death. As with any religious building or icon in Thailand, an unwanted or crumbling spirit house should never be dismantled or destroyed, which is why you'll often see damaged spirit houses placed around the base of a sacred banyan tree, where they are able to rest in peace.

The coastal environment

Spanning some 1650km north to south, Thailand lies in the heart of Southeast Asia's tropical zone, its southern border running less than seven degrees north of the Equator. Coastal Thailand's climate is characterized by high temperatures and even higher humidity, a very fertile combination which nourishes a huge diversity of flora and fauna in the tropical rainforests, mangrove swamps and coral reefs that constitute the region's main habitats.

The habitats

Some of Thailand's most precious habitats are protected as **national park**, including the steamy jungles of Khao Sok; the coastal mud flats of Khao Sam Roi Yot and the expansive lagoons of Thale Noi, both of which are favourite haunts of migrating birds; the turtle-hatching beaches of Ko Surin and Phuket's Hat Mai Khao; and the islands and adjacent coral reefs of Ko Similan, Ko Phi Phi, Ko Tarutao, Ang Thong, Ko Samet and the Ko Chang archipelago.

Tropical rainforests

Thailand's **tropical rainforests** occur in areas of high and prolonged rainfall in the southern peninsula, most accessibly in the national parks of Khao Sok, Tarutao and Khao Luang. Some areas contain as many as two hundred species of tree within a single hectare, along with a host of other flora. Characteristic of a tropical rainforest is the multi-layered series of **canopies**. The uppermost storey of emergent trees sometimes reaches 60m, and these towering trees often have enormous buttressed roots for support; beneath this, the dense canopy of 25–35m is often festooned with climbers and epiphytes such as ferns, lianas, mosses and orchids; then comes an uneven layer 5–10m high consisting of palms, rattans, shrubs and small trees. The forest floor in tropical rainforests tends to be relatively open and free of dense undergrowth, owing to the intense filtering of light by the upper three layers.

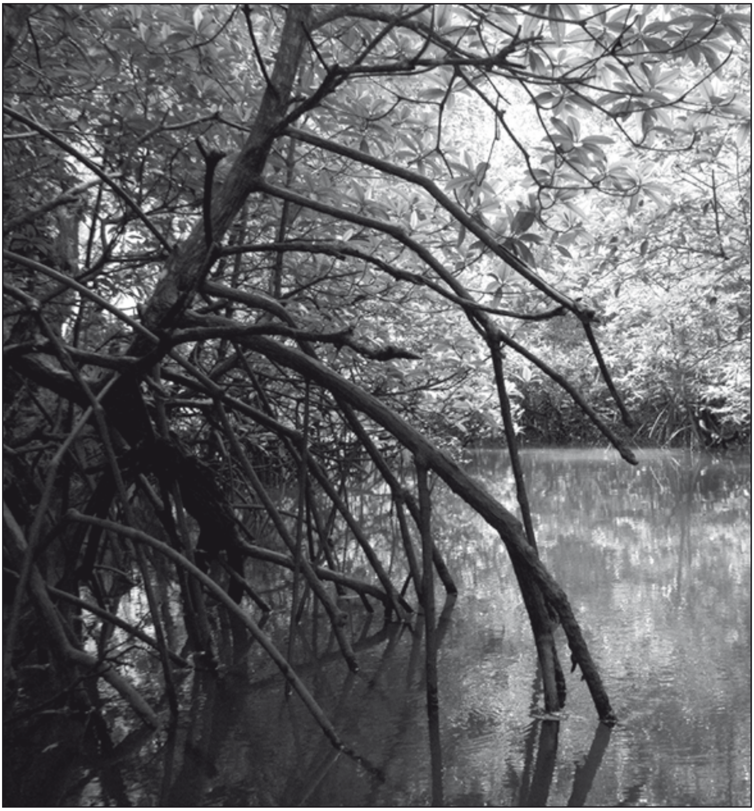
The family **Dipterocarpaceae** dominate these forests, a group of tropical hardwoods prized for their timber and, in places, their resin. The name comes from the Greek and means "two-winged fruit". Though dipterocarps provide little food for fauna, they play an important role as nesting sites for hornbills, as lookout posts for gibbons – and as timber.

Tropical rainforests play host to a plethora of **epiphytes**, of which there are over a thousand species in Thailand. These are plants that usually grow on other plants, though they don't feed from them. Instead they obtain nutrients from the atmosphere, the rain, and decaying plant and animal matter. Some of the commoner epiphytes in Thailand include the golden spiky petalled *Bulbophyllum picturatum*, the bright yellow members of the genus *Dendrobium*, the ivory-coloured *Cymbidium siamensis*, the flame-red *Ascocentrum curvifolium*, and the blue *Vanda coerulea*.

For the early years of its life, the **strangling fig** (*Ficus* sp) is also an epiphyte. The fig's peculiar life starts after the flower has been fertilized by a species-specific wasp host. The ripe fruit must then pass through the gut of a bird or animal and be dropped in a moist spot somewhere near the sunlit canopy of a support tree, often a dipterocarp. After germination, the fig lives a typical epiphytic lifestyle, but also spreads a lattice of roots down to the ground. Once tethered to the earth, the fig gives up its epiphytic role and feeds normally by extracting nutrients from the soil. After many years, the fig's roots completely enshroud the support tree, and eventually the crown spreads over and above its host, cutting off the support tree's light and thereby hastening its death. The support tree subsequently decomposes, leaving a hollow but structurally sound strangling fig. Strangling figs are excellent places to observe birds and mammals, particularly when in fruit, as they attract hornbills, green pigeons, barbets, gibbons, langurs and macaques.

Mangrove swamps and coastal forests

Mangrove swamps are an important habitat for a wide variety of marine life (including 204 species of bird, 74 species of fish and 54 types of crab) but, as with much of Thailand's inland forest, they have been significantly degraded by encroachment, as well as by large-scale prawn farming. Huge swathes of Thailand's coast used to be fringed with mangrove swamps, but now they are mainly found only along the west peninsular coast, between Ranong and Satun. On Phuket, the Thachatchai Nature Trail leads you on a guided tour through a patch of mangrove swamp, but an even better way of **exploring the swamps** is to paddle a kayak through the mangrove-clogged inlets and island-lagoons of Ao Phang Nga, for more on which see the colour section on Ao Phang Nga, and p.424. Not only do mangrove swamps harbour a rich and important eco-system of their own, but they also help prevent coastal erosion; in certain areas of the tsunami-hit



△ Mangrove swamp, Andaman coast

Andaman coast intact mangrove forest absorbed some of the waves' impact, protecting land and homes from even worse damage.

Nipa palms share the mangrove's penchant for brackish water, and these stubby-stemmed palm trees grow in abundance in southern **coastal areas**, though commercial plantations are now replacing the natural colonies. Like most other species of palm indigenous to Thailand, the nipa is a versatile plant, its components exploited to the full – alcohol is distilled from its sugary sap, for instance, while roofs, sticky-rice baskets and chair-backs are constructed from its fronds.

Taller and more elegant, **coconut palms** grace some of Thailand's most beautiful beaches. On islands such as Ko Kood, they form the backbone of the local economy, with millions of coconuts harvested every month for their milk, their oil, their fibrous husks (used in matting and for brushes and mattress stuffing) and their wood.

Casuarinas also flourish in sandy soils and are common on beaches throughout Thailand; because they are also fast-growing and attain heights of up to 20m, they are quite often used in afforestation programmes along the coast where they make useful wind-breaks. At first glance, the casuarina's feathery profile makes it look like a pine tree of some kind, but it's actually made up of tiny twigs, not needles.

The wildlife

In zoogeographical terms, Thailand lies in an exceptionally rich "transition zone" of the Indo-Malayan realm, its forests, mountains and national parks attracting creatures from both Indochina and Indonesia. In all, Thailand is home to three hundred species of mammal (36 of which are considered to be endangered) and 971 species of bird (42 of them endangered). For a guide to Thailand's spectacular array of **marine species**, see the colour section on pp.18–24.

Mammals

In the main national parks like Khao Sok, the animals you're most likely to encounter – with your ears if not your eyes – are **primates**, particularly macaques and gibbons.

The latter are responsible for the unmistakeable hooting that echoes through the forests of some of the national parks. Chief noise-maker is the **white-handed or lar gibbon**, an appealing beige- or black-bodied, white-faced animal whose appearance, intelligence and dexterity unfortunately make it a popular pet. The poaching and maltreating of lar gibbons has become so severe that a special Gibbon Rehabilitation Project has been set up in Phuket (see p.418).

Similarly chatty, macaques hang out in gangs of twenty or more. The **long-tailed** or **crab-eating macaque** lives in the lowlands, near the rivers, lakes and coasts of Ao Phang Nga, Krabi, Ko Tarutao, Ang Thong and Khao Sam Roi Yot, for example. It eats not only crabs, but mussels, other small animals and fruit, transporting and storing food in its big cheek pouch when swimming and diving. The **pig-tailed macaque**, so called because of its short curly tail, excels at scaling tall trees, a skill which has resulted in many of the males being captured and trained to pick coconuts.

Commonly sighted on night treks in Khao Sam Roi Yot, the **civet** – species of which include the common palm and small Indian – is a small mongoose-type animal which hunts smaller mammals in trees and on the ground; it's known in the West for the powerful smell released from its anal glands, a scent used commercially as a perfume base. More elusive is the **Indochinese tiger**, which lives under constant threat from both poachers and the destruction of its habitat by logging interests, both of which have reduced the current population to probably fewer than one hundred; for now Khao Sok is the likeliest place for sightings. Khao Sok is also potentially one of the easier places to encounter wild, small-eared Asian **elephants**, of which around two thousand now remain in Thailand.

The shy, nocturnal **tapir**, an ungulate with three-toed hind legs and four-toed front ones, lives deep in the forest of peninsular Thailand but is occasionally spotted in daylight. A relative of both the horse and the rhino, the tapir is the size of a pony and has a stubby trunk-like snout and distinctive colouring that serves to confuse predators: the front half of its body and all four legs are black, while the rear half is white.

Birds

Even if you don't see many mammals on a trek through a national park, you're certain to spot a satisfying range of birds. The **hornbill** is the most majestic, easily recognizable from its massive, powerful wings (the flapping of which can be heard for long distances) and huge beak surmounted by a bizarre horny casque. The two most commonly spotted species in Thailand are the plain black-and-white **oriental pied hornbill** (frequently sighted on the little islands of Ko Phayam and Ko Chang in Ranong province, among other places) and the flashier **great hornbill**, whose monochromic body and head are broken up with jaunty splashes of yellow. Thailand is also home to the extremely rare **Gurney's pitta**, found only in Khlong Thom national park, inland from Ko Lanta.

Coastal areas attract storks, egrets and herons, and Thale Noi Waterbird Park and the mud flats of Khao Sam Roi Yot are breeding grounds for the large, long-necked **purple heron**. The magnificent **white-bellied sea eagle** haunts the Thai coast, nesting in the forbidding crags around Ao Phang Nga, Krabi and Ko Tarutao and preying on fish and sea snakes. The tiny **edible nest swiftlet** makes its eponymous nest – the major ingredient of bird's-nest soup and a target for thieves – in the limestone crags, too, though it prefers the caves within these karsts; for more on these swiftlets and their nests see box on p.460.

Snakes

Thailand is home to around 175 different species and subspecies of **snake**, 56 of them dangerously venomous. Death by snakebite is not common, however, but all provincial hospitals should keep a stock of serum, produced at the Snake Farm in Bangkok.

Found everywhere and highly venomous, the two-metre, nocturnal, yellow-and-black-striped **banded krait** is one to avoid, as is the shorter but equally poisonous **Thai** or **monocled cobra**, which lurks in low-lying humid areas and

The gecko

Whether you're staying on a beach or in a town, chances are you'll be sharing your room with a few **geckos**. These pale green tropical lizards, which are completely harmless to humans and usually measure a cute four to ten centimetres in length, mostly appear at night, high up on walls and ceilings, where they feed on insects. Because the undersides of their flat toes are covered with hundreds of microscopic hairs that catch at even the tiniest of irregularities, geckos are able to scale almost any surface, including glass, which is why you usually see them in strange, gravity-defying positions. The largest and most vociferous gecko is known as the tokay in Thai, named after the disconcertingly loud sound it makes. Tokays can grow to an alarming 35cm but are welcomed by most householders, as they devour insects and mice; Thais also consider it auspicious if a baby is born within earshot of a crowing tokay.

close to human habitation. As its name implies, this particular snake sports a distinctive "eye" mark on its hood, the only detail on an otherwise plain brown body. The other most widespread poisonous snake is the sixty-centimetre **Malayan pit viper**, whose dangerousness is compounded by its unnerving ability to change the tone of its pinky-brown and black-marked body according to its surroundings.

Non-venomous but considerably mightier, with an average measurement of 7.5m (maximum 10m) and a top weight of 140kg, the **reticulated python** is Thailand's largest snake, and the second largest in the world after the anaconda. Tan-coloured, with "reticulated" black lines, it's found especially in the suburbs of Greater Bangkok, and feeds on rats, rabbits, small deer, pigs, cats and dogs, which it kills by constriction; if provoked, it can kill humans in the same way. South of Chumphon, the **mangrove snake** lives in the humid swamps that fringe the river banks, estuaries and coastal plains. Arboreal, nocturnal and mildly venomous, it can grow to about 2.5m and is black with thin yellow bands set at fairly wide intervals.

Environmental issues

Thailand's rapid economic growth has had a significant effect on its environment. Huge new infrastructure projects, an explosion in real-estate developments and the constantly expanding tourist industry have all played a part, and the effects of the subsequent **deforestation** and pollution have been felt nationwide. Such was the devastation caused by floods and mud slides in Surat Thani in 1988 that the government banned commercial logging the following year, though land continues to be denuded for other purposes. There is also the endemic problem of "influence" so that when a big shot wants to clear a previously pristine area for a new property development, for example, it is virtually impossible for a lowly provincial civil servant to reject their plan, or money. Thailand lost nine percent of its forest cover between 1990 and 2005 (2005 figures show just over 28 percent of Thailand's total land area as forested).

Though flooding has always been a feature of the Thai environment, crucial to the fertility of its soil, and its worst effects obviated by the stilted design of the traditional Thai house, in recent times far more dangerous **flash floods** have recurred with depressing frequency every year, most dramatically around the northern town of Pai in 2005, where many homes and guest houses were washed away. More mundanely there is now an almost annual inundation of certain riverside town centres, and of roads and railways, particularly along the Gulf coast. The link between deforestation and flash floods is now disputed, though encroaching cement and tarmac on Thai flood plains surely play a part, as does the clogging of exit channels by garbage and other pollutants, and of course climate change.

Infrastructure projects and energy policies

The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) has harnessed some of the nation's river power for hydroelectric schemes. However, a number of these, along with other large-scale **infrastructure projects**, have caused significant controversy, both because of corrupt practices and loss of forest, and also because of inadequate compensation for displaced villagers. The plight of the three thousand families affected by the 1994 completion of the Pak Mun dam in the northeast struck a chord with many poor and disaffected communities across Thailand and resulted in the founding of the Assembly of the Poor, now the most powerful grassroots movement in the country.

Hydroelectric projects notwithstanding, Thailand has to date depended on lignite (low-grade coal) for most of its **energy**, and currently less than two percent of its energy output comes from renewable sources. Greenpeace says that, with the right policies, by 2020 a third of the country's power could be produced by renewables, and is calling on the government to phase out its coal-fired plants. As a small step in that direction, the government anticipates a forty-fold increase in the use of solar energy by 2010: a nationwide scheme has already supplied off-the-grid homes on Thailand's less developed islands with solar panels and will have fitted 120,000 homes in other remote rural locations by completion.

Reefs and shorelines

Many of Thailand's **coral reefs** – some of which are thought to be around 450 million years old – are being destroyed by factors attributable to tourism. The main cause of tourism-related destruction is the pollution generated by the hotels and bungalows which have multiplied unchecked at many of the most beautiful sites on the coasts. The demand for coral souvenirs is exploited by unscrupulous divers and local traders, and some irresponsible dive leaders allow their customers to use harpoon guns, which cause terrible damage to reefs. Still, the destruction of coral by tourists is dwarfed by that wreaked by the practice of dynamite fishing and cyanide poisoning, which happen in areas away from the normal tourist haunts.

The 2004 **tsunami** also caused significant damage to coastal and marine environments the length of the Andaman coast. Reefs close to shore were crushed by debris (furniture, machinery, even cars) and buried under displaced soil; the sea was temporarily polluted by extensive damage to sewage systems; and tracts of shorefront farmland were rendered unusable by salt water.

National parks

Although Thailand has since the 1970s been protecting some of its natural resources within **national parks**, these have long been caught between commercial and conservationist aims, an issue which the government addressed in 2002 by establishing a new National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Department (DNP; Ⓦwww.dnp.go.th), separate from the Royal Forestry Department and its parent Ministry of Agriculture.

With 114 national parks across the country, plus 24 national marine parks as well as various other protected zones, over thirteen percent of the country is now, in theory at least, protected from encroachment and hunting (a high proportion compared to other nations, such as Japan at 6.5 percent, and the US at 10.5 percent). However, the **touristification** of certain national parks such as Ko Phi Phi and Ko Samet endures, and was highlighted when the RFD allowed a film crew to "relandscape" part of Ko Phi Phi Leh in 1999 for the movie *The Beach* – to vociferous protest from environmental groups. There is no question that both Phi Phi and Samet have suffered huge environmental damage as a direct result of the number of overnight visitors they receive. While most people understand that the role of the national parks is to conserve vulnerable and precious resources, the dramatic hike in entrance fees payable by foreigners to national parks – from B20 up to B200 in 2000 – was greeted with cynicism and anger, not least because there is often little sign of anything tangible being done on site with the money.

Books

We have included publishers' details for books that may be hard to find outside Thailand, though some of them can be ordered online through ⓦwww.dcothai.com. Other titles should be available worldwide.

Culture and society

Michael Carrithers *The Buddha: A Very Short Introduction*. Accessible account of the life of the Buddha, and the development and significance of his thought.

Philip Cornwel-Smith and John Goss *Very Thai*. Why do Thais decant their soft drinks into plastic bags, and how does one sniff-kiss? Answers and insights aplenty in this intriguingly observant and highly readable fully illustrated guide to contemporary Thai culture.

James Eckardt *Bangkok People* (Asia Books, Bangkok). The collected articles of a renowned expat journalist, whose interviews and encounters with a gallery of different Bangkokians – from construction-site workers and street vendors to boxers and political candidates – add texture and context to the city.

Sandra Gregory with Michael Tierney *Forget You Had A Daughter: Doing Time in the "Bangkok Hilton" – Sandra Gregory's Story*. The frank and shocking account of a young British woman who was imprisoned in Bangkok's notorious Lard Yao prison after being caught trying to smuggle 89 grammes of heroin out of Thailand.

Sebastian Hope *Outcasts of the Islands: The Sea Gypsies of Southeast Asia*. Unusual insight into the lives of the *chao ley* people from a British traveller who spent several months in various sea gypsy communities.

Erich Krauss *Wave of Destruction: One Thai Village and its Battle with the Tsunami*. A sad and often shocking, clear-eyed account of what Ban Nam Khen went through before, during and after the tsunami. Fills in many gaps left unanswered by news reports at the time.

Father Joe Maier *Welcome To The Bangkok Slaughterhouse: The Battle for Human Dignity in Bangkok's Bleakest Slums*. Catholic priest Father Joe shares the stories of some of the Bangkok street kids and slum-dwellers that his charitable foundation has been supporting since 1972 (see Basics p.75).

Cleo Odzer *Patpong Sisters*. An American anthropologist's funny and touching account of her life with the prostitutes and bar girls of Bangkok's notorious red-light district.

James O'Reilly and Larry Habegger (eds) *Travelers' Tales: Thailand*. An absorbing anthology of contemporary writings about Thailand, by Thailand experts, social commentators, travel writers and first-time visitors.

Phra Peter Pannapadipo *Little Angels: The Real-Life Stories of Twelve Thai Novice Monks*. A dozen young boys, many of them from desperate backgrounds, tell the often poignant stories of why they became novice monks. For some, funding from the Students Education Trust (described on p.75) has changed their lives.

Phra Peter Pannapadipo *Phra Farang: An English Monk in Thailand*. Behind the scenes in a Thai monastery: the frank, funny and illuminating account of a UK-born former businessman's life as a Thai monk.

Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidh Piriyarangsan *Corruption and Democracy* *in Thailand*. Fascinating academic study, revealing the nuts and bolts of corruption in Thailand and its links with all levels of political life, and suggesting a route to a stronger society. Their sequel, a study of Thailand's illegal economy, *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja*, co-written with Nualnoi Treerat, makes equally eye-opening and depressing reading.

William Warren *Living in Thailand*. Luscious gallery of traditional houses, with an emphasis on the homes of Thailand's rich and famous; seductively photographed by Luca Invernizzi Tettoni.

History

William Stevenson *The Revolutionary King*. Fascinating biography of the normally secretive King Bhumibol, by a British journalist who was given unprecedented access to the monarch and his family. The overall approach is fairly uncritical, but lots of revealing insights emerge along the way.

William Warren *Jim Thompson: the Legendary American of Thailand*. The engrossing biography of the ex-intelligence agent, art collector and Thai silk magnate whose disappearance in Malaysia in 1967 has never been satisfactorily resolved.

David K. Wyatt *Thailand: A Short History*. An excellent, recently updated treatment, scholarly but highly readable, with a good eye for witty, telling details. Good chapters on the story of the Thais before they reached what's now Thailand, and on recent developments.

Art and architecture

Steve Van Beek *The Arts of Thailand*. Lavishly produced and perfectly pitched introduction to the history of Thai architecture, sculpture and painting, with superb photographs by Luca Invernizzi Tettoni.

Sumet Jumsai *Naga: Cultural Origins in Siam and the West Pacific*. Wide-ranging discussion of water symbols in Thailand and other parts of Asia, offering a stimulating mix of art, architecture, mythology and cosmology.

Steven Pettifor *Flavours: Thai Contemporary Art*. Takes up the baton from Poshyananda (see below) to look at the newly invigorated art scene in Thailand from 1992 to 2004, with profiles of 23 leading lights, including painters, multimedia and performance artists.

Apinan Poshyananda *Modern Art In Thailand*. Excellent introduction which extends up to the early 1990s, with very readable discussions on dozens of individual artists, and lots of colour plates.

William Warren and Luca Invernizzi Tettoni *Arts and Crafts of Thailand*. Good-value large-format paperback, setting the wealth of Thai arts and crafts in cultural context, with plenty of attractive illustrations and colour photographs.

Natural history and travel guides

Ashley J. Boyd and Collin Piprell *Diving in Thailand*. A thorough guide to 84 dive sites, detailing access, weather conditions, visibility, scenery and marine life for each, plus general introductory sections on Thailand's marine life, conservation and photography tips.

Thom Henley *Krabi: Caught in the Spell – A Guide to Thailand's Enchanted Province* (Thai Nature Education, Phuket). Highly readable features and observations on the attractions and people of south Thailand's most beautiful region, written by an expat environmentalist.

Boonsong Lekagul and Philip D. Round *Guide to the Birds of Thailand* (Saha Karn Bheat, Thailand). Worth scouring second-hand outlets for this hard-to-find but unparalleled illustrated guide to Thailand's birds.

Craig Robson *A Field Guide to the Birds of Thailand*. Expert and beautifully illustrated guide to Thailand's top 950 bird species, with locator maps.

Eric Valli and Diane Summers *The Shadow Hunters*. Beautifully photographed photo-essay on the birds'-nest collectors of southern Thailand, with whom the authors spent over a year, together scaling the phenomenal heights of the sheer limestone walls.

Literature

Alastair Dingwall (ed) *Traveller's Literary Companion: Southeast Asia*. A useful though rather dry reference, with a large section on Thailand, including a book list, well-chosen extracts, biographical details of authors and other literary notes.

Chart Korpjitti *The Judgement* (Thai Modern Classics). Sobering modern-day tragedy about a good-hearted Thai villager who is ostracized by his hypocritical neighbours. Contains lots of interesting details on village life and traditions and thought-provoking passages on the stifling conservatism of rural communities. Winner of the S.E.A. Write award in 1982.

Rattawut Lapcharoensap *Sightseeing*. This outstanding debut collection of short stories by a young Thai-born author now living overseas highlights big, pertinent themes – cruelty, corruption, racism, pride – in its neighbourhood tales of randy teenagers, bullyboys, a child's friendship with a Cambodian refugee, a young man who uses family influence to dodge the draft.

Nitaya Masavisut (ed) *The S.E.A. Write Anthology of Thai Short Stories and Poems* (Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai). Interesting medley of short stories and poems by Thai writers who have won Southeast Asian Writers' Awards, providing a good introduction to the contemporary literary scene.

S.P. Somtow *Jasmine Nights*. An engaging and humorous rites-of-passage tale, of an upper-class boy learning what it is to be Thai. *Dragon's Fin Soup and Other Modern Siamese Fables* is an imaginative and entertaining collection of often supernatural short stories, focusing on the collision of East and West.

Khamsing Srinawk *The Politician and Other Stories* (Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai). A collection of brilliantly satiric short stories, full of pithy moral observation and biting irony, which capture the vulnerability of peasant farmers in the north and northeast, as they try to come to grips with the modern world. Written by an insider from a peasant family, who was educated at Chulalongkorn University, became a hero of the left, and joined the communist insurgents after the 1976 clampdown.

Thailand in foreign literature

Dean Barrett *Kingdom of Make-Believe*. Despite the clichéd ingredients – the Patpong go-go bar scene, opium smuggling in the Golden Triangle, Vietnam veterans – this novel about a return to Thailand following a twenty-year absence turns out to be a rewardingly multi-dimensional take on the farang experience.

Botan *Letters from Thailand* (Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai). Probably the best introduction to the Chinese community in Bangkok, presented in the form of letters written over a twenty-year period by a Chinese emigrant to his mother. Branded as both anti-Chinese and anti-Thai, this 1969 prizewinning book is now mandatory reading in schools.

John Burdett *Bangkok 8*. Gripping Bangkok thriller that takes in Buddhism, plastic surgery, police corruption, the yaa baa drugs trade, hookers, jade-smuggling and the spirit world.

Alex Garland *The Beach*. Gripping cult thriller (later made into a film) that uses a Thai setting to explore the way in which travellers' ceaseless quest for "undiscovered" utopias inevitably leads to them despoiling the idyll.

Andrew Hicks *Thai Girl*. A British backpacker falls for a reticent young beach masseuse on Ko Samet but struggles with age-old cross-cultural confusion in this sensitive attempt at a different kind of expat novel.

Michel Houellebecq *Platform*. Sex tourism in Thailand provides the nucleus of this brilliantly provocative (some would say offensive) novel, in which Houellebecq presents a ferocious critique of Western decadence and cultural colonialism, and of radical Islam too.

Christopher G. Moore *God Of Darkness* (Asia Books, Bangkok). Thailand's best-selling expat novelist sets his most intriguing thriller during the economic crisis of 1997 and includes plenty of meat on endemic corruption and the desperate struggle for power within family and society.

Food and cookery

Vatcharin Bhumichitr *The Taste of Thailand*. Another glossy introduction to this eminently photogenic country, this time through its food. The author runs a Thai restaurant in London and provides background colour as well as about 150 recipes adapted for Western kitchens.

Jacqueline M. Piper *Fruits of South-East Asia*. An exploration of the bounteous fruits of the region, tracing their role in cooking, medicine, handicrafts and rituals. Well illustrated with photos, watercolours and early botanical drawings.

David Thompson *Thai Food*. Comprehensive, impeccably researched celebration of Thai food, with over 300 recipes, by the owner of the first Thai restaurant ever to earn a Michelin star.

Language

Language

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Language

Thai belongs to one of the oldest families of languages in the world, Austro-Thai, and is radically different from most of the other tongues of Southeast Asia. Being tonal, Thai is extremely difficult for Westerners to master, but by building up from a small core of set phrases, you should soon have enough to get by. Most Thais who deal with tourists speak some English, but once you stray off the beaten track you'll probably need at least a little Thai. Anywhere you go, you'll impress and get better treatment if you at least make an effort to speak a few words.

Distinct dialects are spoken in the north, the northeast and the south, which can increase the difficulty of comprehending what's said to you. **Thai script** is even more of a problem to Westerners, with 44 consonants to represent 21 consonant sounds and 32 vowels to deal with 48 different vowel sounds. However, street signs in touristed areas are nearly always written in Roman script as well as Thai, and in other circumstances you're better off asking than trying to unscramble the swirling mess of symbols, signs and accents. For more information on transliteration into Roman script, see the box in this book's introduction.

Among **language books**, *Thai: The Rough Guide Phrasebook* covers the essential phrases and expressions in both Thai script and phonetic equivalents, as well as dipping into grammar and providing a menu reader and fuller vocabulary in dictionary format (English-Thai and Thai-English). Probably the best pocket dictionary is Paiboon Publishing's (Ⓦwww.ThaiLao.com) *Thai-English, English-Thai Dictionary*, which lists words in phonetic Thai as well as Thai script, and features a very handy table of the Thai alphabet in a dozen different fonts; it's also available as a searchable dictionary for Palm PDAs. Among the rest, G.H. Allison's *Mini English-Thai and Thai-English Dictionary* (Chalermnit) has the edge over *Robertson's Practical English-Thai Dictionary* (Asia Books), although it's more difficult to find.

The best **teach-yourself course** is the expensive *Linguaphone Thai*, which includes six CDs or six cassettes. *Thai for Beginners* by Benjawan Poomsan Becker (Paiboon Publishing; Ⓦwww.ThaiLao.com) is a cheaper, more manageable textbook and is especially good for getting to grips with the Thai writing system; you can also buy accompanying CDs or tapes to help with listening skills. For a more traditional textbook, try Stuart Campbell and Chuan Shaweevongse's *The Fundamentals of the Thai Language*, which is comprehensive, though hard going. G.H. Allison's *Easy Thai* is best for those who feel the urge to learn the alphabet. The **website** Ⓦwww.thai-language.com is an amazing free resource, featuring a searchable dictionary of over 27,000 Thai words, complete with Thai script and audio clips, plus a guide to the language and forums.

Pronunciation

Mastering **tones** is probably the most difficult part of learning Thai. Five different tones are used – low, middle, high, falling, and rising – by which the meaning of a single syllable can be altered in five different ways. Thus, using four of the five tones, you can make a sentence just from just one syllable: "mái mài mâi mǎi" meaning "New wood burns, doesn't it?" As well as the natural difficulty in becoming attuned to speaking and listening to these different tones, Western efforts are complicated by our habit of denoting the overall meaning of a sentence by modulating our tones – for example, turning a statement into a question through a shift of stress and tone. Listen to native Thai speakers and you'll soon begin to pick up the different approach to tone.

The pitch of each tone is gauged in relation to your vocal range when speaking, but they should all lie within a narrow band, separated by gaps just big enough to differentiate them. The **low tones** (syllables marked ˋ), **middle tones** (unmarked syllables), and **high tones** (syllables marked ˊ) should each be pronounced evenly and with no inflection. The **falling tone** (syllables marked ^) is spoken with an obvious drop in pitch, as if you were sharply emphasizing a word in English. The **rising tone** (marked ˇ) is pronounced as if you were asking an exaggerated question in English.

As well as the unfamiliar tones, you'll find that, despite the best efforts of the transliterators, there is no precise English equivalent to many **vowel and consonant sounds** in the Thai language. The lists below give a rough idea of pronunciation.

Vowels

a	as in dad.
aa	has no precise equivalent, but is pronounced as it looks, with the vowel elongated.
ae	as in there.
ai	as in buy.
ao	as in now.
aw	as in awe.
e	as in pen.
eu	as in sir, but heavily nasalized.
i	as in tip.
ii	as in feet.
o	as in knock.
oe	as in hurt, but more closed.
oh	as in toe.
u	as in loot.
uay	"u" plus "ay" as in pay.
uu	as in pool.

Consonants

r	as in rip, but with the tongue flapped quickly against the palate – in everyday speech, it's often pronounced like "l".
kh	as in keep.
ph	as in put.
th	as in time.
k	is unaspirated and unvoiced, and closer to "g".
p	is also unaspirated and unvoiced, and closer to "b".
t	is also unaspirated and unvoiced, and closer to "d".

General words and phrases

Greetings and basic phrases

When you speak to a stranger in Thailand, you should generally end your sentence in *khráp* if you're a man, *khâ* if you're a woman – these untranslatable politening syllables will gain goodwill, and are nearly always used after *sawàt dii* (hello/goodbye) and *khàwp khun* (thank you). *Khráp* and *khâ* are also often used to answer "yes" to a question, though the most common way is to repeat the verb of the question (precede it with *mâi* for "no"). *Châi* (yes) and *mâi châi* (no) are less frequently used than their English equivalents.

Hello	sawàt dii
Where are you going?	pai nǎi? (not always meant literally, but used as a general greeting)
I'm out having fun/ I'm travelling	pai thîaw (answer to pai nǎi, almost indefinable pleasantry)
Goodbye	sawàt dii/la kàwn
Good luck/cheers	chôk dii
Excuse me	khǎw thâwt
Thank you	khàwp khun
It's nothing/it doesn't matter	mâi pen rai
How are you?	sabai dii reǔ?
I'm fine	sabai dii
What's your name?	khun chêu arai?

My name is…	phǒm (men)/ diichǎn (women) chêu…
I come from…	phǒm/diichǎn maa jàak…
I don't understand	mâi khâo jai
Do you speak English?	khun phûut phasǎa angkrìt dâi mǎi?
Do you have…?	mii…mǎi?
Is there…?	…mii mǎi?
Is…possible?	…dâi mǎi?
Can you help me?	chûay phǒm/ diichǎn dâi mǎi?
(I) want…	ao…
(I) would like to…	yàak jà…
(I) like…	châwp…
What is this called in Thai?	níi phasǎa thai rîak wâa arai?

Getting around

Where is the…?	…yùu thîi nǎi?
How far?	klai thâo rai?
I would like to go to…	yàak jà pai…
Where have you been?	pai nǎi maa?
Where is this bus going?	rót níi pai nǎi?
When will the bus leave?	rót jà àwk mêua rai?
What time does the bus arrive in…?	rót theǔng…kìi mohng?
Stop here	jàwt thîi nîi
here	thîi nîi
there/over there	thîi nâan/thîi nôhn
right	khwǎa
left	sái
straight	trong
north	neǔa
south	tâi

east	tawan àwk
west	tawan tòk
near/far	klâi/klai
street	thanǒn
train station	sathàanii rót fai
bus station	sathàanii rót meh
airport	sanǎam bin
ticket	tǔa
hotel	rohng raem
post office	praisanii
restaurant	raan ahǎan
shop	raan
market	talàt
hospital	rohng pha-yaabaan
motorbike	rót mohtoesai
taxi	rót táksîi
boat	reua
bicycle	jàkràyaan

Accommodation and shopping

How much is…?	…thâo rai/kìi bàat?

How much is a room here per night?	hâwng thîi nîi kheun lá thâo rai?

Do you have a cheaper room?	mii hâwng thùuk kwàa mǎi?
Can I/we look at the room?	duu hâwng dâi mǎi?
I/We'll stay two nights	jà yùu sǎwng kheun
Can you reduce the price?	lót raakhaa dâi mǎi?

Can I store my bag here?	fàak krapǎo wái thîi nîi dâi mǎi?
cheap/expensive	thùuk/phaeng
air-con room	hǎwng ae
ordinary room	hǎwng thammadaa
telephone	thohrásàp
laundry	sák phâa
blanket	phâa hòm
fan	phát lom

General adjectives

alone	khon diaw
another	ìik…nèung
bad	mâi dii
big	yài
clean	sa-àat
closed	pìt
cold (object)	yen
cold (person or weather)	nǎo
delicious	aròi
difficult	yâak
dirty	sokaprok

easy	ngâi
fun	sanùk
hot (temperature)	ráwn
hot (spicy)	phèt
hungry	hiǔ khâo
ill	mâi sabai
open	pòet
pretty	sǔay
small	lek
thirsty	hiǔnám
tired	nèu-ai
very	mâak

General nouns

Nouns have no plurals or genders, and don't require an article.

bathroom/toilet	hǎwng nám
boyfriend or girlfriend	faen
food	ahǎan

foreigner	fàràng
friend	phêuan
money	ngoen
water/liquid	nám

General verbs

Thai verbs do not conjugate at all, and also often double up as nouns and adjectives, which means that foreigners' most unidiomatic attempts to construct sentences are often readily understood.

come	maa
do	tham
eat	kin/thaan khâo
give	hâi
go	pai

sit	nâng
sleep	nawn làp
take	ao
walk	doen pai

Numbers

zero	sǔun
one	nèung
two	sǎwng
three	sǎam

four	sìi
five	hâa
six	hòk
seven	jèt

eight	pàet
nine	kâo
ten	sìp
eleven	sìp èt
twelve, thirteen…	sìp săwng, sìp săam…
twenty	yîi sìp/yiip
twenty-one	yîi sìp èt

twenty-two, twenty-three…	yîi sìp săwng, yîi sìp săam…
thirty, forty, etc	săam sìp, sìi sìp…
one hundred, two hundred…	nèung rói, săwng rói…
one thousand	nèung phan
ten thousand	nèung mèun

Time

The commonest system for telling the time, as outlined below, is actually a confusing mix of several different systems. The State Railway and government officials use the 24-hour clock (9am is *kâo naalikaa*, 10am *sìp naalikaa*, and so on), which is always worth trying if you get stuck.

1–5am	tii nèung–tii hâa
6–11am	hòk mohng cháo–sìp èt mohng cháo
noon	thîang
1pm	bài mohng
2–4pm	bài săwng mohng–bài sìi mohng
5–6pm	hâa mohng yen–hòk mohng yen
7–11pm	nèung thûm–hâa thûm
midnight	thîang kheun
What time is it?	kìi mohng láew?
How many hours?	kìi chûa mohng?
How long?	naan thâo rai?
minute	naathii

hour	chûa mohng
day	waan
week	aathít
month	deuan
year	pii
today	wan níi
tomorrow	phrûng níi
yesterday	mêua wan
now	diăw níi
next week	aathít nâa
last week	aathít kàwn
morning	cháo
afternoon	bài
evening	yen
night	kheun

Days

Sunday	wan aathít
Monday	wan jan
Tuesday	wan angkhaan
Wednesday	wan phút

Thursday	wan pháréuhàt
Friday	wan sùk
Saturday	wan săo

Food and drink

Basic ingredients

Kài	Chicken	**Plaa mèuk**	Squid
Mŭu	Pork	**Kûng**	Prawn, shrimp
Néua	Beef, meat	**Hŏy**	Shellfish
Pèt	Duck	**Hŏy nang rom**	Oyster
Ahăan thaleh	Seafood	**Puu**	Crab
Plaa	Fish	**Khài**	Egg
Plaa dùk	Catfish	**Phàk**	Vegetables

Vegetables

Makĕua	Aubergine	**Taeng kwaa**	Cucumber
Makĕua thêt	Tomato	**Phrík yùak**	Green pepper
Nàw mái	Bamboo shoots	**Krathiam**	Garlic
Tùa ngâwk	Bean sprouts	**Hèt**	Mushroom
Phrík	Chilli	**Tùa**	Peas, beans or lentils
Man faràng	Potato	**Tôn hŏrm**	Spring onions
Man faràng thâwt	Chips		

Noodles

Ba miì	Egg noodles
Kwáy tiăw (sên yaì/sên lék)	White rice noodles (wide/thin)
Ba miì kràwp	Crisp fried egg noodles Rice noodles/egg noodles fried with egg, small pieces of meat and a few vegetables
Kwáy tiăw/ ba miì haêng	Rice noodle/egg noodles fried with egg, small pieces of meat and a few vegetables
Kwáy tiăw/ba miì nám (mŭu)	Rice noodle/egg noodle soup, made with chicken broth (and pork balls)
Kwáy tiăw/ ba miì rât nâ (mŭu)	Rice noodles/egg noodles fried in gravy-like sauce with vegetables (and pork slices)
Phàt thai	Thin noodles fried with egg, bean sprouts and tofu, topped with ground peanuts
Phàt siyú	Wide or thin noodles fried with soy sauce, egg and meat

Names and descriptions of Thai fruits are given on p.53.

Rice

Khâo	Rice
Khâo man kài	Slices of chicken served over marinated rice
Khâo mŭu daeng	Red pork with rice
Khâo nâ kài/pèt	Chicken/duck served with sauce over rice
Khâo niăw	Sticky rice
Khâo phàt	Fried rice
Khâo kaeng	Curry over rice
Khâo tôm	Rice soup (usually for breakfast)

Curries and soups

Kaeng phèt	Hot, red curry
Kaeng phánaeng	Thick, savoury curry
Kaeng khĭaw wan	Green curry
Kaeng mátsàman	Rich Muslim-style curry, usually with beef and potatoes
Kaeng karìi	Mild, Indian-style curry
Kaeng sôm	Fish and vegetable curry
Kaeng liang	Aromatic vegetable soup
Tôm khà kài	Chicken coconut soup
Tôm yam kûng	Hot and sour prawn soup
Kaeng jèut	Mild soup with vegetables and usually pork

Salads

Lâap	Spicy ground meat salad
Nám tòk	Grilled beef or pork salad
Sôm tam	Spicy papaya salad
Yam hua plee	Banana flower salad
Yam néua	Grilled beef salad
Yam plaa mèuk	Squid salad
Yam sôm oh	Pomelo salad
Yam plaa dùk foo	Crispy fried catfish salad
Yam thuù phuu	Wing-bean salad
Yam wun sen	Noodle and pork salad

Other dishes

Hâwy thâwt	Omelette stuffed with mussels
Kài phàt bai kraprao	Chicken fried with basil leaves
Kài phàt nàw mái	Chicken with bamboo shoots
Kài phàt mét mámûang	Chicken with cashew nuts
Kài phàt khĭng	Chicken with ginger
Kài yâang	Grilled chicken
Khài yát sài	Omelette with pork and vegetables
Khanŏm jiin nám yaa	Noodles topped with fish curry
Kûng chúp paêng thâwt	Prawns fried in batter
Mŭu prîaw wăan	Sweet and sour pork
Néua phàt krathiam phrík thai	Beef fried with garlic and pepper
Néua phàt nám man hâwy	Beef in oyster sauce
Phàt phàk bûng fai daeng	Morning glory fried in garlic and bean sauce
Phàt phàk lăi yàng	Stir-fried vegetables
Pàw pía	Spring rolls
Plaa nêung páe sá	Whole fish steamed with vegetables and ginger
Plaa rât phrík	Whole fish cooked with chillies
Plaa thâwt	Fried whole fish
Sàté	Satay
Thâwt man plaa	Fish cake

Thai desserts (khanŏm)

Khanŏm beuang	Small crispy pancake folded over with coconut cream and strands of sweet egg inside
Khâo lăam	Sticky rice, coconut cream and black beans cooked and served in bamboo tubes
Khâo niăw daeng	Sticky red rice mixed with coconut cream
Khâo niăw thúrian/ mámûang	Sticky rice mixed with coconut cream and durian/mango
Klûay khàek	Fried banana
Lûk taan chêum	Sweet palm kernels served in syrup
Săngkhayaa	Coconut custard
Tàkôh	Squares of transparent jelly (jello) topped with coconut cream

Drinks (khreûang deùm)

Bia	Beer
Chaa ráwn	Hot tea
Chaa yen	Iced tea
Kaafae ráwn	Hot coffee
Kâew	Glass
Khúat	Bottle
Mâekhŏng (or anglicized “Mekong”)	Thai brand-name rice whisky
Nám klûay	Banana shake
Nám mánao/sôm	Fresh, bottled or fizzy lemon/orange juice
Nám plào	Drinking water (boiled or filtered)
Nám sŏdaa	Soda water
Nám tan	Sugar
Kleua	Salt
Nám yen	Cold water
Nom jeùd	Milk
Ohlíang	Iced coffee
Thûay	Cup

Ordering

I am vegetarian/vegan	**Phŏm (male)/ diichăn (female) kin ahăan mangsàwirát/jeh**
Can I see the menu?	**Khăw duù menu?**
I would like…	**Khăw…**
With/without…	**Saì/mâi saì…**
Can I have the bill please?	**Khăw check bin?**

Glossary

Amphoe District.

Amphoe muang Provincial capital.

Ao Bay.

Apsara Female deity.

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva representing compassion.

Avatar Earthly manifestation of a deity.

Ban Village or house.

Bang Village by a river or the sea.

Bencharong Polychromatic ceramics made in China for the Thai market.

Bhumisparsa mudra Most common gesture of Buddha images; symbolizes the Buddha's victory over temptation.

Bodhisattva In Mahayana Buddhism, an enlightened being who postpones his or her entry into Nirvana.

Bot Main sanctuary of a Buddhist temple.

Brahma One of the Hindu trinity – "The Creator". Usually depicted with four faces and four arms.

Celadon Porcelain with distinctive grey-green glaze.

Changwat Province.

Chao ley/chao nam "Sea gypsies" – nomadic fisherfolk of south Thailand.

Chedi Reliquary tower in Buddhist temple.

Chofa Finial on temple roof.

Deva Mythical deity.

Devaraja God-king.

Dharma The teachings or doctrine of the Buddha.

Dharmachakra Buddhist Wheel of Law (also known as Wheel of Doctrine or Wheel of Life).

Doi Mountain.

Erawan Mythical three-headed elephant; Indra's vehicle.

Farang Foreigner/foreign.

Ganesh Hindu elephant-headed deity, remover of obstacles and god of knowledge.

Garuda Mythical Hindu creature – half-man half-bird; Vishnu's vehicle.

Gopura Entrance pavilion to temple precinct (especially Khmer).

Hamsa Sacred mythical goose; Brahma's vehicle.

Hanuman Monkey god and chief of the monkey army in the Ramayana; ally of Rama.

Hat Beach.

Hin Stone.

Hinayana Pejorative term for Theravada school of Buddhism, literally "Lesser Vehicle".

Ho trai A scripture library.

Indra Hindu king of the gods and, in Buddhism, devotee of the Buddha; usually carries a thunderbolt.

Isaan Northeast Thailand.

Jataka Stories of the five hundred lives of the Buddha.

Khaen Reed and wood pipe; the characteristic musical instrument of Isaan.

Khao Hill, mountain.

Khlong Canal.

Khon Classical dance-drama.

Kinnari Mythical creature – half woman, half bird.

Kirtimukha Very powerful deity depicted as a lion-head.

Ko Island.

Ku The Lao word for prang; a tower in a temple complex.

Laem Headland or cape.

Lakhon Classical dance-drama.

Lak muang City pillar; revered home for the city's guardian spirit.

Lakshaman/Phra Lak Rama's younger brother.

Lakshana Auspicious signs or "marks of greatness" displayed by the Buddha.

Lanna Northern Thai kingdom that lasted from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century.

Likay Popular folk theatre.

Longyi Burmese sarong.

Luang Pho Abbot or especially revered monk.

Maenam River.

Mahathat Chedi containing relics of the Buddha.

Mahayana School of Buddhism now practised mainly in China, Japan and Korea; literally "the Great Vehicle".

Mara The Evil One; tempter of the Buddha.

Mawn khwaan Traditional triangular or “axe-head” pillow.

Meru/Sineru Mythical mountain at the centre of Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies.

Mondop Small, square temple building to house minor images or religious texts.

Moo/muu Neighbourhood.

Muang City or town.

Muay thai Thai boxing.

Mudra Symbolic gesture of the Buddha.

Mut mee Tie-dyed cotton or silk.

Naga Mythical dragon-headed serpent in Buddhism and Hinduism.

Nakhon Honorific title for a city.

Nam Water.

Nam tok Waterfall.

Nang thalung Shadow-puppet entertainment, found in southern Thailand.

Nielloware Engraved metalwork.

Nirvana Final liberation from the cycle of rebirths; state of non-being to which Buddhists aspire.

Pak Tai Southern Thailand.

Pali Language of ancient India; the script of the original Buddhist scriptures.

Pha sin Woman’s sarong.

Phi Animist spirit.

Phra Honorific term – literally “excellent”.

Phu Mountain.

Prang Central tower in a Khmer temple.

Prasat Khmer temple complex or central shrine.

Rama/Phra Ram Human manifestation of Hindu deity Vishnu; hero of the Ramayana.

Ramakien Thai version of the Ramayana.

Ramayana Hindu epic of good versus evil: chief characters include Rama, Sita, Ravana, Hanuman.

Ravana/Totsagan Rama’s adversary in the Ramayana; represents evil.

Reua hang yao Longtail boat.

Rishi Ascetic hermit.

Rot ae/rot tua Air-conditioned bus.

Rot thammadaa Ordinary bus.

Sala Meeting hall, pavilion, bus stop – or any open-sided structure.

Samlor Passenger tricycle; literally “three-wheeled”.

Sanskrit Sacred language of Hinduism; also used in Buddhism.

Sanuk Fun.

Sema Boundary stone to mark consecrated ground within temple complex.

Shiva One of the Hindu trinity – “The Destroyer”.

Shiva lingam Phallic representation of Shiva.

Soi Lane or side road.

Songkhran Thai New Year.

Songthaew Pick-up used as public transport; literally “two rows”, after the vehicle’s two facing benches.

Takraw Game played with a rattan ball.

Talat Market.

Talat nam Floating market.

Talat yen Night market.

Tambon Subdistrict.

Tavatimsa Buddhist heaven.

Tha Pier.

Thale Sea or lake.

Tham Cave.

Thanon Road.

That Chedi.

Thep A divinity.

Theravada Main school of Buddhist thought in Thailand; also known as Hinayana.

Totsagan Rama’s evil rival in the Ramayana; also known as Ravana.

Tripitaka Buddhist scriptures.

Trok Alley.

Tuk-tuk Motorized three-wheeled taxi.

Uma Shiva’s consort.

Ushnisha Cranial protuberance on Buddha images, signifying an enlightened being.

Viharn Temple assembly hall for the laity; usually contains the principal Buddha image.

Vipassana Buddhist meditation technique; literally “insight”.

Vishnu One of the Hindu trinity – “The Preserver”. Usually shown with four arms, holding a disc, a conch, a lotus and a club.

Wai Thai greeting expressed by a prayer-like gesture with the hands.

Wang Palace.

Wat Temple.

Wiang Fortified town.

Yaksha Mythical giant.

Yantra Magical combination of numbers and letters, used to ward off danger.

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Help us update

We've gone to a lot of effort to ensure that the third edition of **The Rough Guide to Thailand's Beaches and Islands** is accurate and up to date. However, things change – places get "discovered", opening hours are notoriously fickle, restaurants and rooms raise prices or lower standards. If you feel we've got it wrong or left something out, we'd like to know, and if you can remember the address, the price, the time, the phone number, so much the better.

We'll credit all contributions, and send a copy of the next edition (or any other Rough Guide if you prefer) for the best letters. Everyone who writes to us and isn't already a subscriber will receive a copy of our full-colour thrice-yearly newsletter. Please mark letters: "**Rough Guide Thailand's Beaches and Islands Update**" and send to: Rough Guides, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, or Rough Guides, 4th Floor, 345 Hudson St, New York, NY 10014. Or send an email to **mail@roughguides.com**

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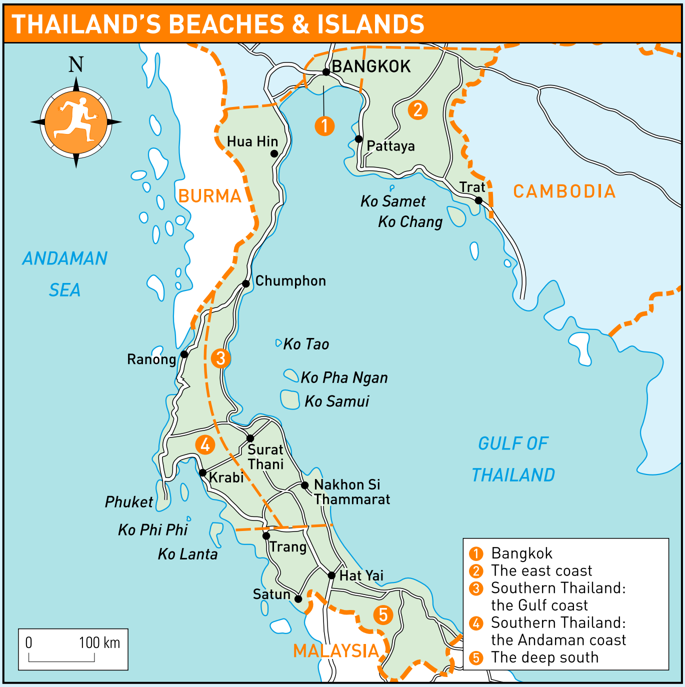
Map symbols

maps are listed in the full index using coloured text

▬ ▬ ▬ ·	International boundary
▬ ▬ ▬	Chapter division boundary
═	Road
= = =	Unpaved road
- - - - - -	Path
━━━	Railway
— —	Ferry route
─	Waterway
━	Wall
●- - -●	Cable car & station
♦	Point of interest
▣	Accommodation
◉	Restaurants & bars
⛺	Campground
↑	Border crossing
▲	Peak
⌒⌒	Mountains
◓	Cave
♨	Spring
≋	Waterfall
⌇	Rock
⛯	Lighthouse
✺	Viewpoint
⊠	Gate
∩	Arch
⁄	Dam
⊙	Statue
✈	Airport
★	Transport stop
♜	Museum
@	Internet access
ⓘ	Information office
✆	Telephone
⊞	Hospital
✉	Post office
⚖	Market
🏊	Swimming pool
🕌	Mosque
⛪	Temple
⛩	Chinese temple/pagoda
✚	Church
🟧	Building
▨	Forest
✝	Christian cemetery
▨	Park
⁘	Beach



THAILAND'S BEACHES & ISLANDS

N
BANGKOK
Hua Hin
Pattaya
BURMA
Trat
CAMBODIA
Ko Samet
Ko Chang
ANDAMAN SEA
Chumphon
Ko Tao
Ranong
Ko Pha Ngan
Ko Samui
GULF OF THAILAND
Surat Thani
Krabi
Nakhon Si Thammarat
Phuket
Ko Phi Phi
Ko Lanta
Trang
Hat Yai
Satun
MALAYSIA
0 100 km
① Bangkok
② The east coast
③ Southern Thailand: the Gulf coast
④ Southern Thailand: the Andaman coast
⑤ The deep south

About this book

Rough Guides are designed to be good to read and easy to use. The book is divided into the following sections and you should be able to find whatever you need in one of them.

The **colour section** is designed to give you a feel for Thailand's beaches and islands, suggesting when to go and what not to miss, and includes a full list of **contents**. This is followed by a **marine life section** to help make the most of underwater Thailand, and then comes **basics**, for pre-departure information and other practicalities.

The **guide** chapters cover the regions in depth, each starting with a highlights panel, introduction and a map to help you plan your route.

The **contexts** section fills you in on history, religion and environmental issues and reviews the best books, while individual **colour inserts** introduce Thai cuisine and the seascape of Ao Phang Nga, and **language** gives you an extensive menu reader and enough Thai to get by.

The book concludes with all the **small print**, including details of how to send in updates and corrections, and a comprehensive **index**.

This third edition published November 2006.

The publishers and authors have done their best to ensure the accuracy and currency of all the information in The Rough Guide to Thailand's Beaches and Islands, however, they can accept no responsibility for any loss, injury, or inconvenience sustained by any traveller as a result of information or advice contained in the guide.

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